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"A THORN-CHOKED GARDEN PLOT": WOMEN'S PLACE IN EMILY DICKINSON AND CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

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"A THORN-CHOKED GARDEN PLOT": WOMEN'S PLACE IN EMILY DICKINSON AND CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

by

DARLENE BEAMAN

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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May, 1986
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1986
"A THORN-CHOKED GARDEN PLOT":
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DARLENE BEAMAN

ABSTRACT

Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti, born just five
days apart in 1830, wrote similarly on love, restriction,
identity, and death. Their similarities arose not because
one poet influenced the other, but because both poets shared
the identity of single women in strong patriarchal
societies. Although shared lifestyles as single and
relatively secluded women who remained in their parents'
homes do not prove a shared outlook, their biographies
support the theory that both grappled with the problem of a
woman's place.

Both poets are too ensconced in male tradition to
disregard outworn beliefs, particularly those beliefs
concerning a woman's place in nature and in love, but both
begin deceptively to change sexual connotations within
traditional stereotypes. Dickinson presents this change in
women positively, while Rossetti presents non-conforming
women as failures. But they picture the destructiveness of
stereotypes that obliterate a woman's identity in love.

Walls, masks, and other enclosures abound in both
women's poetry. In Rossetti's verse, walls and self-imposed
masks protect women against punishable indulgences, but
these enclosures confine and deaden. The freedom from this imposed imprisonment characterizes many of her religious poems. In Dickinson's poetry, barriers induce imaginative questing and desires for escape, just as punishment affirms the promethean artistic self. Both women reveal the confinement of restrictions upon women, but where Dickinson advocates the breaking of boundaries, if only through secret imaginative flight, Rossetti reinforces the validity of boundaries and conformity.

Both poets convey a woman's anxiety of loss over place, sexuality, and integrated identity when she fails to fit into expected roles. Their poetry enacts the similar characteristics of psychic fragmentation and existential reality, particularly through the recurrence of mirroring pronominal structures and negative or empty metaphors. But these aspects of multiplicity proliferate a linguistic freedom beyond the boundaries of conventional femininity.

Finally, both poets examine the precepts of consolation literature and attempt to reconcile the problems of a woman's earthly place with the proposed triumphs of her heavenly place. But while Rossetti paradoxically provides women only with the metaphoric perfection of their earthly positions, Dickinson discards the consolation of a heavenly place and envisions the rewards of an androgynous poetic voice.
Dedicated with love to Glen
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe a great amount of thanks to the members of my committee, Dr. Robert Patten, Dr. Susan Gillman, and Dr. Elizabeth Long for their insightful comments and editorial precision. I especially want to thank Dr. Linda Driskell for her professional example and her kindness, and Dr. William Piper for his encouragement and advice.
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The Home: Locating Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti

This is the true nature of home—it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. . . . And wherever a true wife comes, this home is always round her. . . . This, then, I believe to be . . . the woman's true place and power. . . . But do you not see that to fulfill this, she must—as far as one can use such terms of a human creature—be incapable of error? . . . She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise—wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation.

—John Ruskin, "Of Queens' Gardens," (1865)

All causes, social and natural, combine to make it unlikely that women should be collectively rebellious to the power of men. . . . Men do not want solely the obedience of women, they want their sentiments. . . . They have therefore put everything in practice to enslave their minds. . . . All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; no self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others. All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections.

—John Stuart Mill, The Subjection of Women, (1869)

The old cliche, "a woman's place is in the home," developed vigor in the nineteenth-century when more women desired to reach beyond the "self-renunciation" of the home to the outside world of "self-development." These women struggled not only against increasing social opposition but also against ingrained cultural guilt because they were
shirking their "true" place and responsibilities. Sherry B. Ortner, a woman anthropologist who studies the differences between men and women, writes that society (men and women) view women as inferior, second-class citizens of culture because of women's procreative tie with nature: a "woman's body seems to doom her to mere reproduction of life; the male, in contrast, lacking natural creative functions, must (or has the opportunity to) assert his creativity externally, 'artificially,' through the medium of technology and symbols." Women pioneering in cultural productivity, then, surely experienced a common interior battle against inferiority and guilt as well as a common insecurity about their place.

Both Emily Dickinson's and Christina Rossetti's poems work through these interior battles of inferiority, guilt, and insecurity. While both women lyrically celebrate life, a majority of their poems weigh heavy with pain, guilt, psychic division, and death. The striking similarities between the two poets' work, however, do not arise from a knowledge of one another; neither poet apparently influenced the other. Although born just five days apart—Rossetti in London on December 5, 1830 and Dickinson in Amherst, Massachusetts on December 10, 1830—Dickinson never mentioned reading Rossetti's work, and Rossetti read Dickinson's poetry in 1890, four years after Dickinson's
death and only four years before Rossetti's. Rossetti commented only briefly to her brother William about Dickinson's work: "She had . . . a wonderfully Blakean gift, but therewithal a startling recklessness of poetic ways and means." If Rossetti recognized an affinity between her work and Dickinson's, she remained silent. Why then did both poets write so consistently on similar subjects, if not because of a shared influence upon one another? The reasons for their similarities stem instead from a shared search for identity: both became self-centered poets in societies that revered women's self-renunciation and disdained women's self-advancement.

Particularly in the nineteenth-century, the majority did believe that the woman belonged in the home. Although many protested against women's inferior status, prominent men fought to retain the status quo. John Stuart Mill and John Ruskin represent the opposite poles on women's rights, but both serve to verify the guilt and division that women who reached beyond expected roles experienced. In 1869, Mill published The Subjection of Women and examined how men could not only control and restrict women, but cause both men and women to believe in the morality of that subjection. Mill pinpointed education and "current sentimentalities," which taught women that their duty and their nature was "to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves," as
men's practice "to enslave" women's minds. Just four years earlier in 1865, John Ruskin had published *Sesame and Lilies* and written the very sentimentalities that Mill described as calculated enslavement.

Ruskin devoted his second chapter, "Of Queen's Gardens," to woman's abilities and her subsequent role in society. As Ruskin's title suggests, a woman's talents lay in her cultivation of the garden of home. Ruskin described "the true nature of home" as "the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division." The woman guarded this peace. To be able to function in her "true place and power," however, she must be "incapable of error... She must be enduringly incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise--wise, not for self-development, but self-renunciation." Ruskin expected wonders from the woman who truly worked to secure the world's morality from the home-front, and he blamed women for failing in their duty because corruption still existed in the world: "There is not a war in the world, no, nor an injustice, but you women are answerable for it; not in that you have provoked, but in that you have not hindered... There is no suffering, no injustice, no misery in earth, but the guilt of it lies with you." Many others believed along with Ruskin in the power of the woman's moral influence in the home. Walter Houghton in
The Victorian Frame of Mind explains that men in nineteenth-century England fought women's equal rights largely because they feared the loss of a vital moral influence.

The Americans in the nineteenth-century also expected women to sanctify and create a virtuous home. Emily Dickinson's father, Edward Dickinson, instructed Emily Norcross, his future wife, on the duty of a woman that sounds similar to the duties of a Victorian woman:

Continue in the path of innocence and virtue and fidelity--continue to cultivate those graces which are the charm of your sex and let that sincere desire for that pure and unsullied reputation which are the pride of both sexes incite us to avoid the appearance of evil--and let our conduct be marked by that correctness which shall insure our happiness and may an approving conscience be our reward.

Like Ruskin, Edward Dickinson metaphorically placed his future wife in a fictional garden of Eden before man's fall. He wanted her to continue in the "path of innocence and virtue and fidelity" and "to cultivate those graces which are the charm of your sex." Both sides of the ocean considered the home as the garden of virtues walled off from the world's corruption, and the woman protected that garden. But although this system allowed her the creativity to cultivate the garden, restrictions confined her within its
walls.

The similarities in the lives of Dickinson and Rossetti illustrate the common lack of freedom for nineteenth-century women. The unmarried, ambitious woman had neither the framework nor the societal acceptance to create her own place, while the married woman rarely possessed the freedom for ambitious advancement. Even though, as Lionel Stevenson suggests, "a common literary tradition and a common psychological type seem to provide a more plausible explanation" than biography for why certain poets such as Dickinson and Rossetti wrote similarly, their affinities in sensibility might have arisen from the similar restrictions upon their lives as women. Their similarities center around each woman's seclusion in her parents' home and each one's refusal to marry.

Common restrictions caused each poet to grapple with similar issues concerning women in their poetry, but the circumstances of their lives validate their different methods and conclusions about these issues. Each poet's family quite differently influenced her. Although both women lived at home all of their lives and remained constant companions to their parents until their parents' deaths (Dickinson lived only four years after her mother's death in 1882, and Rossetti, only eight years after her mother's
death in 1886), Dickinson rejected her mother's influence, while Rossetti emulated hers.

Critics have written profusely about the effect of Dickinson's home upon her creativity. The strong patriarchal environment that surrounded Dickinson provided a profound influence. She was born in the Homestead (the first brick house in Amherst) built by her grandfather, Samuel Fowler Dickinson, and, except for a fifteen year period when the family lived elsewhere, Emily Dickinson lived in the Homestead until she died. By the time she turned thirty, she had become a total recluse in the house. In a letter dated June, 1869, Emily refused Thomas Wentworth Higginson's invitation to Boston with the comment, "I do not cross my Father's ground to any House or Town." But although Dickinson remained "at home" for her entire life, she saw this home as "my Father's ground." She never obtained a place that freed her from her patriarchal heritage or that she could claim was "Emily's ground."

Emily's father, Edward Dickinson, forged a formidable figure in Amherst as an attorney with a long list of public accomplishments. In brief, he was elected twice to the State Senate, was a member of the Governor's executive council and a major in the militia, held two terms on the Massachusetts General Court, was a representative to the 33rd United States Congress, was admitted to practice before the Supreme
Court, and was nominated for lieutenant-governor (a nomination, however, that he declined). Locally, he held his law practice, was a leader of the church, and instigated several civic projects (Richard B. Sewall says in his biography of Emily that "there was hardly a civic project in Amherst, from the founding of Massachusetts Agricultural College to the establishment of the local water works, in which Edward Dickinson was not a central figure" ). He was the treasurer of Amherst college for 38 years, the president of the Amherst & Belchertown Rail Road—which he brought to Amherst along with the telegraph, the director of the Home Mission Society, and the trustee of the mental hospital in Northampton. In a letter to Higginson dated April 25, 1862, Emily described her father as "too busy with his Briefs—to notice what we do" (L. #261).

Edward Dickinson's only son, William Austin Dickinson (one year older than Emily), followed in Edward's footsteps as an attorney and a town leader. Edward set up a law practice with his son, Austin, and Austin established his home next door to the Homestead. When Edward resigned as treasurer of Amherst College, Austin was appointed treasurer of the college and held the position until his death. Austin moderated town meetings, was president of the Village Improvement Association, was on the board of the Amherst Library Association, the Amherst Academy, the Amherst Water
Company, and the Amherst Gas Light Company, helped to found and lay out the grounds to the Wildwood Cemetery, and promoted and supervised the construction of the new church building for the First Church.

With such a celebrated father and brother, Emily surely felt like a nobody—

I'm Nobody! Who are you?  
Are you--Nobody--Too?  
Then there's a pair of us?  
Don't tell! they'd advertise--you know!  

How dreary--to be--Somebody!  
How public--like a Frog--  
To tell one's name--the livelong June--  
. To an admiring Bog!  

Surrounded by public, respected men who became "somebody" in the eyes of the town, Dickinson felt indeed like a "nobody." In this poem, she rejected and mocked this public fame and seemed instead content to remain nobody and even anxious to retain her anonymity. But the poem's very presence belies her yearning for self-declaration. If she could not publicly create either a life or a place of her own, she could privately develop a voice to compensate for the void of her own place.

The dominating female presence in her life, Emily Dickinson's mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson, remains an enigma to biographers largely because Mrs. Dickinson almost
never wrote any letters and Emily said very little in her own letters about her mother. Emily's much quoted statement to Higginson in a conversation in 1870 has given Mrs. Dickinson the stigma of having been a bad mother—"I never had a mother. I suppose a mother is one to whom you hurry when you are troubled." Psychologist Dr. John Cody views Mrs. Dickinson's failure as a mother (by caring too much for her own health or the household chores and not enough for her children, particularly Emily) as the cause of Emily's resentment of being female, her rebellion against the church, and her anxiousness in her letters and poetry—Emily felt that her mother had cruelly rejected her.

But other biographers do not agree with this harsh assessment of Mrs. Dickinson. Richard Sewall interprets Emily's love of home as a tribute to the mother who created it. He finds evidence that at least before her long illness, Mrs. Dickinson was "chatty and sociable," and gave generously to needy or grieving families. She contributed annually to the Amherst Cattle Show, hosted the famous Dickinson receptions at Commencement, and actively participated in the work of the First Church, which she joined nineteen years before her husband. Mrs. Dickinson seems to have shared with her daughter her interests in gardening and cooking—two activities in which Emily excelled. On October 17, 1856, Emily's bread won second
prize at the Agricultural Fair. Lavinia, Emily's younger sister who also lived at the Homestead her entire life, said in her later years, "Father believed, and mother loved."

What seems to have bothered Emily Dickinson, however, was not her mother's lack of love or her lack of success in domestic tasks; what bothered her was her mother's lack of intellectual ambition. When Emily wrote to Higginson on April 25, 1862, her description of her mother was, "My Mother does not care for thought" (L. #261). Austin could follow his father as a role model, which he did, but Emily refused to model her life on her mother's.

Barbara Mossberg argues convincingly that Emily rejected and absented her mother from her poetry and letters because she did not want to become like her mother. Emily rejected the role of her mother "as an 'anxious, dependent' servant of her family who was dominated, disregarded, weak, passive, dull, occupied with petty charity and housework, and conventionally pious." Emily rejected the "masculine ideal of femininity embodied by her mother." She desired the son's position and not the daughter's. This desire for male recognition explains why Emily represented her father as a tyrant--he embodied the masculine world "who will not notice her power, her ability to be a son." According to Mossberg's thesis, Emily Dickinson evolved this tension in her writing between a tyrant father, a weak mother, and a
deprived child (whether true or not in reality), because she needed to develop a crisis in her life. Out of this crisis and tension, Dickinson could then create poetry. This thesis, although only conjecture, illustrates the importance of Dickinson's parents to her creativity. Her language rebels from tradition largely because only in her voice could she free herself from the confines of her patriarchal home. For Dickinson, art became a refuge from the fear of a wasted life; a life into which she feared the male community surrounding her tried to make her fit.

Rossetti's family influenced her differently from Dickinson's; instead of wishing for her father's role and rejecting her mother's, Rossetti revered her mother more than her father. Also, unlike Dickinson, Rossetti did not have a strong feeling of patriarchal heritage. Her father, Gabriele Rossetti, and her mother's father, Gaetano Polidori, were political exiles from Italy. Instead of living in a home marked by the presence of strong, rooted patriarchs, Rossetti lived in a English home with matriarchal roots, through her mother's mother.

Christina apparently inherited the Italian emotional temperament from her father and grandfather. Once when scolded for a fault as a child, Christina seized a pair of scissors and ripped open her own arm. Rossetti curbed her own passionate nature, however, since she witnessed how her
father's strong emotions embarrassed the family. They loved him, but because he was "emotional, undisciplined, and demonstrative" in comparison to their mother, the children did not respect him. Christina tried instead to emulate the calm, devoted English nature of her mother, Frances Polidori Rossetti, and her grandmother, Anna Maria Pierce Polidori. Unlike Dickinson who wished to rebel from the continuity of her patriarchal home, Rossetti seemed insecure about her place, her home, and her heritage. Instead of flinging off traditions, she desired to locate them for herself.

Christina may also have lost respect for her father since illness confined him to the home early in her life. 18 years older than Christina's mother, Gabriele Rossetti became very ill in 1843. The illness caused partial blindness which forced him to quit his teaching position and become a permanent invalid until his death in 1854. Frances Rossetti had been a governess before her marriage, so she took up teaching again to support her husband and children. Christina's youth and her own illnesses left her at home to care for her father.

Her mother, Frances Rossetti, acted as the perfect Victorian wife and mother who "asked nothing for herself but was wholly devoted to the care of her husband and children." Rossetti's mother differed from Dickinson's,
however, by her interest in "thought." At age 70, she said, "I always had a passion for intellect, and my wish was that my husband should be distinguished for intellect, and my children too." Notice how she did not mention any desires to be distinguished for her own intellect, but she did not exclude her daughters from such honors. She helped to encourage her children's literary efforts and helped with the production of a family magazine, Rodge Rodge. Unlike Dickinson's perception of her mother as weak and non-intellectual, Christina had a great respect for her mother's strength in financially supporting the family and her interest in intellectually stimulating them.

Christina's religious turmoil and subsequent conflicting attitudes toward her art, however, seemed to arise from the conflict between following her mother's example of self-effacement and following her own desires for self-development and recognition. Christina intermingled her religion and her femininity because she associated the church with her mother. Rossetti's mother and sister were religious while her father and brothers were agnostic. Christina's grandmother, Anna Maria Polidori, raised Frances, Christina's mother, in the Church of England. Frances, in turn, raised all four of her children, including Christina, in the Church of England. But just as their father did, Christina's two older brothers, Dante Gabriel
and William Michael, became agnostic later in life, while Christina and her older sister, Maria, followed their mother and remained devout Christians. Maria even joined an Anglican sisterhood three years before her death in 1876.

Christina struggled, however, with her choice to follow her mother's lead over her father's. As Ralph Bellas points out, her father's "personal history was one of breaking away from restraining political, social, and religious institutions. His two sons, who were very much like him, veered early in life from the narrow path of Victorian conventionality. It was much easier, of course, for a man to forsake the orthodox and traditional than for a woman." Following her mother as a woman and a Christian meant that Christina must renounce her own ambitions and desires. This aspect of Christianity, the command to put oneself last and all others first, oppressed, but also provided tension to create, Christina's writing. Theo Dombrowski also notices this struggle in the personae of her verse: "Far from seeing the ability to choose as a means to moral stature or salvation, the speaker repeatedly views the necessity of choice as an intense torment."

Rossetti revealed the conflict that she felt between Christianity and her desire to assert herself as a woman artist in her mixed reaction to the woman's movement. In a letter written around 1883 to Augusta Webster, poet and
advocate of Women's Suffrage, Rossetti supported women's right to vote:

If female rights are sure to be overborne for lack of female voting influence, then I confess I feel disposed to shoot ahead of my instructresses, and to assert that female Members of Parliament are only right and reasonable. Also I take exceptions at the exclusion of married women from the suffrage,—for who so apt as Mothers . . . to protect the interests of themselves and of their offspring?

Rossetti demonstrated her indecision about a woman's roles or rights through her contradictions within this same letter. Later in this letter, she writes that she could not support the woman's movement because it tended not to "uphold Christianity." This ambivalence between her feelings that women should have the same rights and privileges as men and her feelings that Christians should not desire such self-advancement caused much of Rossetti's ambiguity between her dissatisfaction over women's status and her tendency to reinforce women's traditional place in society.

But Rossetti's ambivalence also derived from her family's relation to art. While art could provide Dickinson with a refuge from the masculine domination surrounding her, art for Rossetti represented male domination. Her mother may have encouraged her to write, but her brother, Dante
Gabriel, critiqued her work and helped her to publish. The world of art belonged to Dante Gabriel and his Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood; he helped her to break into his world, just as he wished to help her to become a member, despite others' opposition, to the PRB. Women rarely created in the "Brotherhood"; instead, as Rossetti described in her poem "In an Artist's Studio," women were passive models for male creators.

An interesting connection exists between Christina's view of herself as artist and as model, particularly in light of Dante Gabriel's conception of the women he creates in art. Since Christina posed for him, she became part of his creation, possibly a part that he did not want violated with her own voice of rebellion. David Sonstroem proposes that Dante Gabriel created four fantasies of women involved in different aspects of salvation. Dante Gabriele portrays the largest group of women in his poems and paintings as either "heavenly Madonna's instrumental in saving men" or "femmes fatales, ladies instrumental in destroying men." (The smaller group encompasses sinful women saved by men or fair ladies victimized by men.) Dante Gabriel's image of Christina fell in the heavenly Madonna's. Christina's face portrays the Virgin Mary in his two most famous portraits of her image, "The Girlhood of the Virgin Mary" and "Ecce Ancilla Domini" (the annunciation of the Virgin Mary).
Dante Gabriel wrote to F. G. Stephens in 1852 about "The Girlhood of the Virgin Mary," "That picture of mine was a symbol of female excellence." Alan Bowness writes of "Ecce Ancilla Domini" that "it is less a devotional image than a painting about female purity and innocence and virginity." Christina must have felt conscious of not disappointing her brother's image of her excellence and purity in her own artistic endeavors. She could be only either a Madonna or a "femme fatale"; any variance from purity lead her into wickedness.

In their familial backgrounds, at least, Dickinson and Rossetti switch the conventional notions of the clan-identified European and the unlocated American. To Dickinson, her parents embodied the traditions that confined her to what she could and could not become, that is, her mother and her father, respectively. She rejected her familial place, but found freedom from its confines in the rebelliousness of her voice. Rossetti, on the other hand, did not respect or wish to emulate her father, an exiled immigrant. She wished instead to model herself on her mother, and to emulate her mother's religious and English conventions. Instead of rebelling from traditions, she desired to create them. This desire, however, conflicted with her self-assertion as a woman poet. But masculine conceptions of women and art, and more specifically, her
brother's depiction of her as the pure and innocent Virgin, muffle Rossetti's assertions and creativity. Her poetry combines a confusion of rebellion and convention. The pain and guilt in the poetry of both women, in fact, stemmed from their confusion over their identities; Dickinson's voice just tended more toward rebellion, and Rossetti's, more toward convention.

Despite the different influences from their families, Dickinson and Rossetti remained in their parents' homes in relative seclusion and continuing illnesses. I say "relative" seclusion because even though both women spent much of their adult lives at home—Rossetti living with her older sister, Maria, and their mother, and Dickinson, with her younger sister, Lavinia, and their mother—both women had a large circle of acquaintances. Rossetti's acquaintances numbered at least fifty well-known personages including Lewis Carroll, John Ruskin, Coventry Patmore, Jean Ingelow, the Madox Browns, and Algernon Charles Swinburne (who in 1883 even dedicated his book, A Century of Roundels, to her). Dickinson, although she actually met with few people personally after her seclusion, had an astounding social outreach. Her known correspondents number ninety-three, and critics believe they have only a fraction of the letters she wrote.

Both women received an education, despite the state of
women's education. A woman's education trained her to become a suitable companion for a man rather than to achieve her own personal advancement. During a long speech on female suffrage in the House of Commons, John Stuart Mill complained of the mere lip-service paid to the education of girls:

We continually hear that the most important part of national education is that of mothers, because they educate the future men. Is this importance really attached to it? Are there many fathers who care as much, or are willing to expend as much, for the education of their daughters as of their sons? Where are the Universities, where the high schools, or the schools of any high description, for them?

Other advocates of female education, however, did not speak for the progression of women's education, but rather the regression of it. Ruskin, in fact, states that educators must train women first to look beautiful: "The first of our duties to her--no thoughtful persons now doubt this,--is to secure for her such physical training and exercise as may confirm her health and perfect her beauty." According to Ruskin, a woman's education must equip her only to be companionable to men: "A man ought to know any language or science he learns, thoroughly--while a woman ought to know the same language, or science, only so far as may enable her to sympathise in her husband's pleasures, and in those of
his best friends."

This attitude sheds light on Edward Dickinson who, although he held disdain for self-liberated women, still desired to educate his daughters well. Edward Dickinson explained to his fiancee in a letter of August 3, 1826 that although he believed women to be capable in the arts and sciences, he would prefer that they not enter into such fields: "Tho' I should be sorry to see another Mme. de Staël--especially if any one wished to make a partner of her for life. Different qualities are more desirable in a female who enters into domestic relations."

Dickinson's family educated her better than Rossetti's did. Mrs. Rossetti taught Christina and her sister Maria; only Christina's brothers, William and Dante Gabriel, attended school. Except for some German lessons that Christina's father exchanged for Italian lessons, the sisters received only lessons in singing and dancing from outside masters. Neither girl had any talent or interest in singing or dancing, but probably Rossetti's parents followed Ruskin's advice (or others of his opinion) to prepare their girls to become suitable companions for men. Fortunately for Maria and Christina, since neither girl ever married, their mother taught them well.

Dickinson, on the other hand, had twelve years of formal education beginning in 1835 at Primary School, in 1840 at
Amherst Academy, and in 1847 at Mount Holyoke. She had a wide education in Mathematics, Geography, History, English, Philosophy, and Science. But only girls attended the academy, and Dickinson told Higginson about her education: "I went to school—but in your manner of the phrase—had no education" (L. #261). Perhaps Dickinson felt that her instructors taught her less rigorously than her brother's. Dickinson could have attended Mount Holyoke longer, but she left after only three terms largely because of illness and homesickness.

Both women, in fact, experienced periodic serious illnesses throughout their lives. Dickinson left school because of illness, later in 1864 left the isolation of her home for eight months of eye treatment in Boston, and frequently spoke in her letters of being ill. Her eye trouble remains a mystery since no records of her treatment are available, but it could have been an early manifestation of Bright's disease, her final illness. Dickinson spent most of her life, however, caring for her mother's long illness which began in 1855 and turned to paralysis in 1875. Dickinson lived only four years after her mother's death in 1882.

Rossetti had more serious illnesses but she lived eight years longer than Dickinson. William Rossetti reported that Christina's poor health began at age fifteen. Mystery
surrounds her early illnesses. James A. Kohl may have added more light to Rossetti's troubled teens with a note he discovered written by Mackenzie Bell's friend Godfrey Bilchett on the back of Bell's book: 'The doctor who attended on Christina Rossetti when she was about 16-18 said she was then more or less out of her mind (suffering, in fact, from a form of insanity, I believe a kind of religious mania)." Whether her illnesses developed from physical or mental irregularities, she avoided her sister's fate of becoming a governess, because her family did not consider her well enough to work. Rossetti's constitution remained weak. In 1864, she began spitting blood and was diagnosed as tubercular, a diagnosis that proved to be unfounded. Finally in 1871, the doctors diagnosed her trouble as exophthalmic bronchocele--Grave's disease--which not only caused her a series of heart attacks, vomiting, fainting, and overall exhaustion, but also disfigured her with protrusion of the eyes and a darkening and discoloration of the skin. Rossetti and her mother nursed each other, and Rossetti died eight years after her mother's death in 1886. One reason, then, that Dickinson and Rossetti spent most of their lives at home was that they had to care for their own health as well as look after their mothers'. Another, and probably more important reason, was that at their parents' homes, they cultivated the time and solitude to write.
A third important similarity in the lives of these two women is that neither one married. Their single status combined with the poets' interest in love, sex, fertility, barrenness, and loneliness has spawned the critics' and biographers' speculations. But each had the choice to marry or to remain single. Both chose to remain single. Adrienne Rich highlights this choice and considers that Rossetti did not marry because she became "a religiously dedicated woman," while Dickinson became dedicated to "the writing of poetry."

Remaining single could be for both women, though, an avoidance of their mothers' roles as self-effacing women. Rossetti seems to have turned down her suitors for religious reasons, but she could also have had the picture of her mother in the back of her mind. If Christina had to support four children and an invalid husband, she would not have had time for the self-indulgence of poetic achievement.

Nevertheless, Rossetti's romantic relationships reinforce the religious conflict in her poetry. Rossetti rejected the proposals of her two suitors, James Collinson and Charles Cayley, apparently for religious reasons. Rossetti broke off her engagement to Collinson in 1848 because Collinson refused to reject the Catholic church for the Church of England. Rossetti refused Cayley's proposal in 1866 because he was agnostic. But although she never
married Cayley, she remained lifetime friends with him. They settled into a relationship of tea and whist games. Cayley sent her unusual gifts such as a mathematical puzzle and a sea-mouse preserved in wine. On Cayley's death in 1883, Rossetti received from him his best writing desk, his books, and any income the estate might receive from his copyrights. Cayley's sister, Sophie Cayley, wrote to Christina after Cayley's death, "You were I know the friend he valued most" (FL. 139).

Some critics, however, do not consider that these relationships provided sufficient impetus for the guilt and passion in Rossetti's love poems. Lona Mosk Packer bases her entire biography of Rossetti on an assumed love affair between Christina Rossetti and William Bell Scott (a more striking gentleman than Rossetti's other suitors and one already married). According to Packer, Scott and Rossetti had an affair from 1848 to 1857 which left Rossetti pining for him in unrequited love for the rest of her life. Subsequent critics, however, find Packer's assumptions erroneous. Professor Fredeman in a review of this biography shows that letters in the Penkill Papers (material unavailable to Packer) reveal that Packer had many of her dates wrong. Battiscombe points out that Packer's theory is all based on supposition; nothing stems from any real fact. But Packer did not need to prove the existence of
an illicit love affair to explain Rossetti's poems on guilt and passion. Rossetti wrote for many different women who felt the conflict between self-indulgence and self-restriction; this guilt could arise from intellectual as well as from physical indulgences.

Dickinson's relationships remain more of a mystery to critics and were possibly more of a fantasy for Dickinson than a reality. Between 1858 and 1863, Dickinson wrote a series of passionate love letters and poems to a person that she called "Master." Biographers have tried to discover the identity of the "Master," but their information remains incomplete. Biographers face the problem that only a fraction of Dickinson's correspondence survives; relatives burned most of her papers after her death.

For many years, critics thought that Dickinson secretly loved Charles Wadsworth, a famous minister in Philadelphia. Critics who purport the story suggest that she met him in 1855 while visiting the Colemans in Philadelphia; the Colemans attended the Arch Street Presbyterian Church where Wadsworth preached. No record of this meeting exists, but Wadsworth and Dickinson probably met at this time. Critics, however, created a secret affair (just as Packer did between Scott and Rossetti) in order to explain Dickinson's withdrawal from the world. Dickinson was to have fallen in love with Wadsworth at first sight, to have become desperate
with frustrated love because Wadsworth was already married, and then to have returned home to Amherst to become a recluse. Recent biographers, however, find that the dates do not match with the frustrated love poetry, nor did her seclusion come about so rapidly. Dickinson was, however, life long friends with Wadsworth. Although her correspondence with Wadsworth did not survive, she mentioned him several times to others in her letters, and there are a few recorded instances of their meetings. She wrote to Higginson in the summer of 1882 after Wadsworth's death and called Wadsworth "My closest earthly friend" (L. #765).

Evidence indicates that Dickinson wrote her frustrated love poems and the Master letters to Samuel Bowles, editor of the Springfield Republican and life-time friend of Austin's and Sue's. His regular visits to Austin's and Sue's home (next door to Emily's) began around 1858. Bowles was also a married and thus presumably unattainable man, but his pictures attest that he was a striking man—someone whom Dickinson might easily fall in love with. The surviving 35 letters and over 50 poems that Dickinson sent Bowles indicate she did love him. But as Sewall comments, her love "was misguided. Bowles was out of her reach in every way, professionally, domestically, morally." Possibly Bowles' unavailability attracted Dickinson; she may not have wanted a lover so much as she wanted a romantic object through
which she could vent her emotions and fuel her imagination. Ruth Miller suggests that Dickinson began writing to Bowles because she hoped he would help her to publish her poems.

In whatever way the relationship began or however hopeless Dickinson's feelings, the two apparently remained friends. Gertrude M. Graves wrote a story of the two in "A Cousin's Memories of Emily Dickinson," *Boston Sunday Globe*, January 12, 1930. Apparently, in 1877 Bowles came to visit and Emily refused to see him. He hollered up the stairs, "Emily, you [damned rascal]! (Ms. Graves inserted wretch.) No more of this nonsense! I've traveled all the way from Springfield to see you. Come down at once." Dickinson came down and was charming and witty (*L. II*, pp. 589-90n.). After this visit, Dickinson sent him a letter with the following poem:

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I have no Life but this--
To lead it here--
Nor any Death--but lest
Dispelled from there--
Nor tie to Earths to come--
Nor Action new
Except through this extent
The love of you. (*L. *$515*)
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Late in life, Dickinson did love and was loved in return by Judge Otis Phillips Lord of Salem. No letters remain from him to her, but both members of the family reveal in
their comments that the love was mutual. Lord, a long time friend of the family—possibly her father's closest friend—resembled Dickinson's father as a public figure and an older man, eighteen years older than Dickinson. Lord presided as judge over the Superior Court of Massachusetts, as well as the Massachusetts Supreme Court. He served five years in the State House of Representatives (one year as Speaker of the House), and one term in the State Senate.

Just when Dickinson's relationship with Lord began is not clear, but Mrs. Lord died December 10, 1877, and critics conjecture that Dickinson's letters to Lord began in 1878. Lord proposed to Dickinson in 1882, but she shied away from marriage (L. $790). A ring (now at Harvard) that Martha Dickinson Bianchi said belonged to Emily bears the engraving, "Philip." Whatever happened between them, at least for six years before his death on March 14, 1884 (just two years before Dickinson's own), Dickinson found an outlet for her love. The first surviving letter we have from her to him begins: "My lovely Salem smiles at me. . . . I confess that I love him—I rejoice that I love him—I thank the maker of Heaven and Earth—that gave him me to love—the exultation floods me" (L. $559).

Thus, Dickinson's and Rossetti's letters and poems attest that neither woman remained single because she neither gave nor received love. Instead, they veered
romantic relationships away from marriage into lifetime friendships. No explicit evidence indicates that they avoided marriage because of their ambitions, but they did seem implicitly to want to avoid their mothers' humbling lifestyles. Remaining in their parents' homes either as an invalid or a recluse, these women could obtain a peculiar freedom from confinement. Possibly, only with this paradoxical confinement could they avoid the second class status of wife and mother and reach to attain a first class status as poet.

Although the poets shared an urgency to grapple with the problems of a woman's place in a man's world, each poet also experienced different national influences that contributed to her unique outlook on similar issues. Such differences as England's desire for stability in a time of economic and religious upheaval versus America's need to establish its independence from European thought may partially account for Rossetti's more traditional solutions as opposed to Dickinson's experimental questions. Because of the alarming growth of technology and science in England, some essayists and novelists looked backward to the stability of earlier values. John Ruskin espoused the superiority of Gothic architecture and craftsmanship. Thomas Carlyle lamented the lack of modern heroes and encouraged Englishmen in their
duty to work while it is day, for the night will come when no man can work. George Eliot and Charles Dickens created heroes and heroines, such as Dickens' heroine Little Dorrit or Eliot's heroine Dorothea Brooke, who succeeded because they always kept their eyes on their duty toward others. John Henry Newman and John Keble led many Anglicans back to the traditions of Catholicism and high Anglicanism and espoused poetry's moral purpose. These English writers reflect Victorian England's attempt to maintain a sense of duty and responsibility toward others' moral and physical well-being though its traditional beliefs had begun to decay.

Yet while England looked backwards to the stable values of earlier periods, America produced essayists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson who preached originality and self-reliance. In contrast to Dickens' heroine, Little Dorrit, who leads a happy and useful existence because she dutifully places the needs and happiness of others before her own wants, Emerson forbids Americans in his essay "Self Reliance" to ever "bow and apologize more. A great man is coming to eat at my house. I do not wish to please him; I wish that he should wish to please me." Instead of looking back as Ruskin did to the superiority of the Gothic traditions and craftsmanship, Henry David Thoreau in Walden Pond pleads with Americans to throw off the "mud and slush of opinion, and
prejudice, and tradition," to disregard the past and renew their sensibilities in the realities of the present. Unlike England's great Victorian poets, Tennyson, Browning, and Hopkins, as well as the minor Tractarian poets such as John Keble, who verify and validate Christian traditions and beliefs in their poems, America's great poet Walt Whitman sings the "Song of Myself" and praises the divinity of the self. Of course these are broad generalizations on a handful of writers in both countries; the general climate, however, encouraged a desire for tradition and stability in England and for originality and change in America.

Although their familial backrounds switch the conventional notions of established roots in Europe and exiled past in America, Rossetti's verse, in her movement toward convention and didacticism, reflects England's climate of duty and tradition. For the most part, Rossetti confines herself to traditional grammar, meter, and verse forms. She conceals her rebelliousness and perceptions of societal problems within solutions of conformity. Her tendency toward moral didacticism probably derives from the influence of the Tractarians in the Oxford Movement. Rossetti attended Christ Church, a Tractarian church, from 1843 to her death.

Critics differ as to the degree which this movement influenced Rossetti's poetry. Germaine Greer believes that
this influence could hardly place Rossetti among the poets of the Oxford movement, since Rossetti's "grasp of theology was poor and she was unconcerned about the rational bases of dogma. She relied entirely upon her emotional apprehension of religious experience and all that concerned her was her life-long love affair with Christ." But others do not criticize Rossetti's intellect as harshly as Greer. G. B. Tennyson calls Rossetti "the true inheritor of the Tractarian devotional mode in poetry." Tennyson disagrees with critics such as Greer who believe that "all longing must be sexual, especially if it is the longing of an unmarried Victorian woman" and feels that such critics have "obscured the extent to which Christina Rossetti's poetry illustrates not Freud's theory of art but Keble's." But in his analysis of Rossetti, Tennyson disregards or fails to mention the poems that do express sexual longings and social discontent.

Nevertheless, Tennyson's portrayal of the Tractarians' aesthetic, that poetry must elevate man's moral sensibilities, explains Rossetti's own affirmation of traditional standards despite her other tendencies. John Keble published an essay in 1814 insisting that poetry should begin and end "in religion and morality":

Aesthetic pleasure stems from the awakening of these moral and religious feelings, so that earthly affections
are tempered and disciplined and human beings can be nearer to what once they were (before the Fall) and may be again (through Christ)."  

Similarly, in 1829, John Henry Newman wrote in his essay "Poetry, with Reference to Aristotle's Poetics," that "with Christians, a poetical view of things is a duty—we are bid to color all things with hues of faith, to see a Divine meaning in every event and a superhuman tendency."  

Such emphasis upon morality, duty, and discipline explains Rossetti's tendency toward devotion and the didacticism in much of her verse and her prose. Often, however, this didacticism battles against her delight in sensual description and melody, as well as her tendency to rebellion and discontent. Virginia Woolf wrote of Rossetti:

You were an instinctive poet... Your instinct was so sure, so direct, so intense that it produced poems that sing like music in one's ears—like a melody by Mozart or an air by Gluck... Like all instincts you had a keen sense of the visual beauty of the world... Your eye, indeed, observed with a sensual pre-Raphaelite intensity that must have surprised Christina the Anglo-Catholic.  

Indeed, the conflicting Pre-Raphaelite and Tractarian influences contribute to the tension in her work between the world and heaven, sensuality and restriction. But Rossetti's work on the whole tends more toward traditional
poetic forms, metaphors, and religious values.

Rebellion, on the other hand, characterizes Dickinson's work—rebellion from the traditional role model set by her mother, from traditional religious beliefs, from traditional poetic forms, and even from traditional uses of grammar. Sewall points out how the grammar book used at the Academy Dickinson attended, Richard Green Parker's *Aids to English Grammar* (1845), probably encouraged Dickinson's grammatical eccentricities. The opening paragraph of the book's preface begins:

> Genius cannot be fettered, and an original and thinking mind, replete with its own exuberance, will often burst out in spontaneous gushings, and open to itself new channels through which the treasures of thought will flow in rich and rapid currents. Rules and suggestions, however, are not wholly useless.

But Dickinson did not just spontaneously gush forth her unfettered genius without any regard to the rules and suggestions of grammar. Although, as Robert Lair points out, Dickinson did often use adjectives for adverbs, nouns for adjectives, active verbs for passive verbs, plural verbs when the singular form is correct, and the subjunctive verb for the indicative, these grammatical oddities "reveal an extraordinary awareness of the potential of language when freed from its narrowest conventional confines." Dickinson actually enriched her poetry by adding "second and third
meanings . . . through syntactic ambivalence."

Dickinson, unlike Rossetti, experimented with grammar and form to the extent of misusing traditional and accepted rules of language.

Dickinson also inherited her desire for change from the Transcendentalists. Although little evidence exists of specific transcendental influence upon Dickinson, Albert Gelpi points out that the end of a comic valentine "indicates how clearly she had absorbed, as early as 1850, the essential features of transcendentalism—the optimism, the emphasis on experimentation and originality, the sense of social purpose, the metaphysical and mystical speculations, the pulse of rhythm and imagery." The end of Dickinson's valentine reads as follows:

But the world is sleeping in ignorance and error, sir, and we must be crowing-cocks, and singing-larks, and a rising sun to awake her; or else we'll pull society up to the roots, and plant it in a different place. We'll build Alms-houses, and transcendental State prisons, and scaffolds—we will blow out the sun, and the moon, and encourage invention. Alpha shall kiss Omega—we will ride up the hill of glory—Hallelujah, all hail! 48

Surely, the one feature of transcendentalism, the movement toward change, remains in Dickinson's poetry, "we will blow out the sun, and the moon, and encourage invention."

Dickinson questioned traditional beliefs in God, prayer, and
paradise in radical ways that go beyond Rossetti's own doubts and problems with Christianity. But Dickinson distinguished herself from other transcendentalists through her questioning. Gelpi says that "Mr. Emerson himself spoke in statements, not questions." Dickinson never completely reconciled her puritan and transcendental influences into a solid belief. But in America's intellectual climate of invention, Dickinson could more easily depart from traditional solutions than could Rossetti. Rossetti and Dickinson may begin with some of the same questions, but Dickinson's open-ended questions examine the possibility for change that Rossetti's closures do not.

But despite these two poets' differences, male mentors who read their unpublished work reacted in the same way to both women's verse: neither poet, according to these men, followed traditional forms closely enough and could not hope, consequently, to publish without closer attention to conventions. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina's brother, believed in Christina's work and sent her poems in 1861 to John Ruskin. Ruskin did not encourage publication and wrote back with the following advice:

I sat up till late last night reading poems. They are full of beauty and power. But no publisher . . . would take them, so full are they of quaintnesses and offences. Irregular measure (introduced to my great regret, in its chief wilfulness by Coleridge) is the calamity of modern poetry. . . . Your sister should
exercise herself in the severest commonplace of metre until she can write as the public like. Then if she puts in her observation and passion all will become precious." (The added emphasis is mine.)

I do not believe, however, that Ruskin did not sponsor Rossetti's poetry because her meter resembled Coleridge's irregular meter. Ruskin wrote that men and women possessed separate powers. Only men had the potential to create poetry: men's "intellect is for speculation and invention. . . . But the woman's . . . intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision." (The added emphasis is mine.) Ruskin did not respond to Rossetti's potential as a poet, but only to her potential as a woman who was, as a woman and not a poet should be, "quaint," "precious," and "sweet."

Dante Gabriel, however, wanted his sister's work published. He approached Alexander Macmillan, the publisher of *Macmillan's Magazine*. Macmillan published, in three separate issues, Rossetti's poems "Uphill," "A Birthday," and "Apple Gathering." In the fall of 1861, Macmillan agreed to publish a small volume of her poems, but he did so with certain reservations. Macmillan wrote to Dante Gabriel: "I quite think a selection of them would have a chance—or to put it more truly that with some omissions they might do. At least I would run the risk of a small
edition." With her brother's persistence then, despite others' resistance, Rossetti became a published poet.

Dickinson, however, did not have a male champion to move her irregular verse past the censureship of unwilling male mentors. She had to send her poetry out on her own. She chose Thomas W. Higginson as her mentor when she read his article, "Letter to a Young Contributor," which appeared in the Atlantic Monthly for April, 1862 and which offered advice to beginning writers. Dickinson sent him four poems and asked, "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?" (L. 260). He apparently responded with the same criticism as Ruskin did to Rossetti about her irregular meter and her need for more work before she ever published. Dickinson's next letter thanked him for his "surgery" and sent more poems. In her third letter to him, Dickinson responded to his criticism:

I smile when you suggest that I delay "to publish"—that being foreign to my thought, as Firmament to Fin—... You think my gait "spasmodic"—I am in danger—Sir—You think me "uncontrolled"—I have no Tribunal. (L. $265)

Just as Ruskin advised Rossetti, Higginson must have advised Dickinson to conform her poetic methods to traditional poetic forms. Possibly Higginson and Ruskin expected these women poets to adhere too closely to a male tradition of
verse and remained unwilling to accept the aberrations of a woman's voice.

Those aberrations definitely exist in the work of both poets. They frequently created irregular rhymes and meter, although they did write at times within tradition and thus did show their awareness of critical expectations. Were both women bad poets, as Ruskin and Higginson indicated? Or possibly did critics judge both more severely because they wanted to discourage women from breaking into a male community; that is, what the critics could accept in Coleridge and Whitman, they could not accept in Rossetti and Dickinson?

Recent critics have begun to compare these two poets as women writers. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar discuss how the nineteenth-century patriarchal society considered poets as priests; women's poetry had to be self-effacing to not infringe upon this male prerogative. But they see Rossetti's self-renunciation as a "willing acceptance" while Dickinson's is "greedy, angry, secretly, or openly self-assertive." While Dickinson is fighting, Rossetti "takes up her pen to spend a lifetime writing 'Amen for us all.'" This view of Rossetti as compared to Dickinson is partially correct, but Gilbert and Gubar fail to recognize the undertones of rebellion in Rossetti as well as in
Dickinson.

Rossetti did struggle to become more conventionally pious and religious, but, particularly in her early poetry, she also rebelled, as Dickinson did, against this societal or religiously imposed self-renunciation. Virginia Woolf noticed this trend, when in 1932 she wrote of Rossetti: "For you were not a pure saint by any means. You pulled legs; you tweaked noses. You were at war with all humbug and pretence." Sharon Leder in her recent dissertation sees Rossetti as less conventional and religious in the first half of her career as a poet (1842-66): "The heroines become progressively more self-assertive and critical of conventional nineteenth-century roles for women as wives and mothers." Possibly, this "unwomanly" rebellious tone in Rossetti's verse offended Ruskin more than her unconventional meter did.

I find that both poets felt an uneasy rebellion against their status, but that each poet responded quite differently to art's possibilities to accommodate this rebellion. Dickinson consciously used art to vent and to free her frustrations and feelings of confinement. Rossetti, on the other hand, viewed art as a public, and consequently, as a male, arena that necessitated conformity and deviousness of rebellion.

As well as comparing their masked or unmasked rebellion
against self-renunciation, critics have also begun to compare the similar tensions in the language of Rossetti and Dickinson. Joanne Fiet Diehl sees that Rossetti "like Dickinson . . . adopts a rhetoric of disguise which allows her to address the forbidden as evil while simultaneously using a language that betrays her awareness of its appeal." But in addition to masking their language of the forbidden to accommodate social restrictions, Cora Kaplan sees both women changing their poetic methods when speaking about the inner life by using "synecdoche, where the part stands for the whole, and metonymy, where the images are narratively or associatively related" rather than using "straightforward metaphorical constructions." I find also that the poets' language fragments just as the image of the self splits into different and antagonistic personae. This fragmentation manifests in mirroring pronomial structures and in negative and empty metaphors.

I plan to expand upon these critics' recognition that Rossetti and Dickinson write similarly because of their femininity and to show how much of their poetry evolves from their struggle to understand, critique, or change a woman's place in society. Neither poet's canon shows a definite progression of ideas--both oscillate between various conflicts throughout their poetic careers. Dolores Rosenblum says of Rossetti's poetry: "Her themes are
presence and absence, fulfillment and loss, joy and sorrow, time and eternity, life and death. There is no progression, no mediate condition, only radical shifts from one state to another in poem after poem." Similarly, Robert Weisbuch writes of Dickinson's work: "There are no distinct shifts either of style or of thought to be found in Dickinson's career. . . . The individual moment, linguistically translated into the nuances of chosen words, will determine a particular resolution. Inevitably, that resolution will be challenged by another poem." Because of this lack of progression (another common trait that evidences both poets' insecurities about their poetic utterances), I treat the poems thematically rather than chronologically. My emphasis is upon how Dickinson and Rossetti treat a woman's place in both private and public life, and how each poet investigates the ways in which a woman's defined place or lack of place affects her psychologically and spiritually.
Notes for Chapter 1

1 Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in Woman, Culture, and Society, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1974, p. 75.

2 Family Letters of Christina Rossetti, ed., William Michael Rossetti (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), p. 176-177. All subsequent references are from this edition and included in the text by the abbreviation "FL" and the page number.


Harvard University Press, 1958, p. 460, L. 330. All subsequent references to Emily Dickinson's letters are from this edition and are included in the text by the letter's number, preceded with the abbreviation, L.

11 Sewall, p. 54.

12 Emily Dickinson, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1960), p. 133, $288. All subsequent references to Emily Dickinson's poems are from this edition and are included in the text by the poem's number.


14 See Sewall, pp.74-90 for a more complete picture of Mrs. Dickinson.


16 Battiscombe, p. 21.

17 Battiscombe, p. 15.


25 See Leyda, "The People Around Emily Dickinson," The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson, I, pp. xxvii-lxxxix for a more complete picture of her acquaintances.


28 Sewall, p. 49.

29 For more explicit information on Dickinson's curriculum see Sewall, "Schooling," The Life of Emily Dickinson, pp. 335-67.

30 See Cody, After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson, for a discussion of her eye disease as psychosomatic.


34 William E. Fredeman, Victorian Studies (Univ. of Indiana) (September 1964), 71-76.

35 Battiscombe, p.62.


37 See William R. Sherwood, Circumference and Circumstance: Stages in the Mind and Art of Emily Dickinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968) for the theory that Dickinson used Wadsworth as an image with which she elaborated in her mind a love relationship that did not exist.

38 Sewall, p. 473.


40 Germaine Greer, "Introduction to Goblin Market" (New


42. Tennyson, p. 28.

43. Tennyson, p. 40.


45. Sewall, p. 350n. See also Lois A. Cuddy, "The Influence of Latin Poetics on Emily Dickinson's Style," *Comparative Literature Studies*, 13 (1976), 214–29, who suggests that Dickinson's Latin textbook, Solomon Stoddard and Ethan Allen Andrews, *A Grammar of the Latin Language* (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1843), provided Dickinson with Latin grammar rules that she then applied to English. For example, Stoddard's definition of "enallage"—"a change of words, or a substitution of one gender, number, case, person, tense, mood, or voice of the same word for another"—might account for Dickinson's substitutions of the subjunctive for the indicative, "And what a billow be" (#1052); of case, "At you and I!" (#10); and of tense, "Is a soul 'forgot'!" (#8).


49. Gelpi, p. 85.


53 See also an earlier and briefer comparison in [Morton D. Zabel], "Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson," *Poetry*, 37 (October, 1930), 213-216.


55 Woolf, p. 220.


The Garden: Cultivating a Female Tradition

_Civilization—spurns— the Leopard!_
_Was the Leopard—bold?_
_Deserts—never rebuked her Satin—_
_Ethiop—her Gold—_
_Tawny—her Customs—_
_She was Conscious—_
_Spotted—her Dun Gown—_
_This was the Leopard’s nature—Signor—_
_Need—a keeper—frown?_

--- Dickinson (#492) ---

Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti worked toward a female tradition, but the male tradition enveloped them too completely to allow either poet to disregard outworn beliefs, particularly beliefs about a woman’s place in relationship to nature and about her place in a love relationship. Every advancement they made to change tradition, they qualified or appeared even to disbelieve themselves. At times, both seem to have written out of nineteenth-century stereotypes for women, as if they used Ruskin as their guide. But a closer examination of the verse reveals a desire within each poet to reform traditional stereotypes or even to show the failure of such stereotypes to define feminine existence.

Women in the nineteenth-century remained at home to cultivate a garden of peace, to bear and raise children in
the protected insulation of the home. To the male writer, women not only created a "garden of eden" but also represented the natural processes of the garden; the man plowed his seed into a woman's fertile and stationary ground to procreate his offspring. The male poetic tradition placed women and nature equally as "other"; Margaret Homans explains how in the Romantic period "where the masculine self dominates and internalizes otherness, that other is frequently identified as feminine, whether she is nature, the representation of a human woman, or some phantom of desire."

Male poets and critics have continued to use the woman's "otherness" to explain a poet's creativity. According to Harold Bloom, a male poet must come to terms first with nature and then with tradition in order to become a strong poet. The male poet comes to terms with nature--"all those processes and phenomena that are eternal, unchanging, unaffected by human effort"--by repressing nature's primal pleasures and seeking them indirectly through an idealized female muse. The muse, who presides over poetic tradition and nature, can mediate for man between nature and art to help him transcend nature. This theory works well for the male creator who fathers forth poetry through the vessel of the female muse, but how does the tradition that places women alongside the otherness of nature affect the poetry of
the woman writer? More particularly, how do Dickinson and Rossetti deal with nature and the "primal pleasures" of love in their poetry? I find that both Rossetti and Dickinson begin to reject traditional poetic stereotypes for women in nature and in love, even though they qualify these rejections with semblances of acceptance and conformity.

Recent critics have begun to consider the woman writer's problems, particularly in the nineteenth-century, with both the male tradition of poetry and the male theories of poetic creation. Pamela Di Pesa, using the theories of Bloom, Freud, and Rank, shows how a male poet unconsciously or consciously absorbs the traditional metaphor of the female muse to "define himself as a poet," while a female poet finds herself outside the tradition without any metaphors to absorb her ambivalence between art and life. According to Di Pesa, a male figure cannot be a muse for women because men represent "sexuality and the reproductive instincts (everything that would tie her to physical responsibilities)." So instead of being able to project their ambivalence toward nature onto another object (that is, an ambivalence between the physical world with its impulses and desires and an artistic world that transcends the flesh), women poets internalize these conflicts. A woman thus finds "no way of breaking her bond with nature" and "is doomed to fight the battle with nature over and over
again." Women paradoxically discover that "in fighting nature, they seem to be fighting their own nature." Thus, as Di Pesa points out, while "the male poet is engaging in healthy and necessary repression, . . . the female poet is engaging in a neurotic avoidance of her own role."

The nineteenth-century woman writer followed few female predecessors; consequently, she struggled more intensely than modern writers with the supposedly conflicting roles of woman and poet. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe how male precursors affect the nineteenth-century woman poet:

She must confront precursors who are almost exclusively male, and therefore significantly different from her. Not only do these precursors incarnate patriarchal authority . . . , they attempt to enclose her in definitions of her person and her potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster) drastically conflict with her own sense of her self—that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity. . . . Thus the "anxiety of influence" that a male poet experiences is felt by a female poet as an even more primary "anxiety of authorship."

Gilbert and Gubar indicate that women in the nineteenth century did not grapple necessarily in their work with tradition and the "anxiety of influence" because traditional definitions of women caused them to grapple with more immediate concerns—their own identities as women and as writers.

Obviously, whatever "anxiety of authorship" that
Dickinson or Rossetti experienced did not keep them from writing: both poets completed a large canon of works. The anxiety of writing from a male tradition that excluded female writers did affect, however, the outcome of what they wrote. Di Pesa's suggestions that a woman finds "no way to break her bond with nature" and that in fighting nature, she seems to fight her "own nature" apply directly to Dickinson's and Rossetti's poetry about women and nature. Dickinson's poems vacillate between feminine identification with nature and feminine competition with a masculine nature. Likewise, Rossetti's use of double women personae reveals a similar conflict between the woman who happily allies herself with nature's processes and the one who suffers from an inability to enjoy such an alliance. Thus, Dickinson and Rossetti do show an "anxiety of influence" as they grapple with changing women's traditional roles. As Gilbert and Gubar suggest, however, Dickinson and Rossetti, also, reveal an "anxiety of authorship" since both fail to adhere openly to their own convictions of change.

I believe that both Dickinson and Rossetti would delight in recent weather reporters' naming hurricanes and tropical storms with masculine names instead of only exclusively feminine names. This small act reveals changing beliefs that society no longer responds to nature as exclusively a feminine domain and civilization as exclusively a masculine
domain. If society indeed perceives women as second class citizens because of their long association with nature (as Ortner suggests and I discussed in Chapter 1), then such small changes in society's terminology make large strides in society's sensitivity to the sexes' equality.

But such efforts to change stereotypes began long before readers and writers became sensitive to sexist language. Dickinson and Rossetti began changing sexual connotations in their poetry. The difference between today's changes and their own lies in their own "deceptiveness." Each poet did make changes, but each also wrote within, and thus reinforced, traditional stereotypes. For instance, in "Civilization--spurns--the Leopard," Dickinson represents nature as the feminine domain and culture as the masculine domain. Although the poem's speaker finds herself physically and culturally tied to an identification with nature, she revels joyfully in this bond. The speaker's misery arises when she transcends and breaks her bond with nature for a civilized life:

Civilization--spurns--the Leopard!
Was the Leopard--bold?
Deserts--never rebuked her Satin--
Ethiop--her Gold--
Tawny--her Customs--
She was Conscious--
Spotted--her Dun Gown--
This was the Leopard's nature--Signor--
Need--a keeper--frown?
The leopard here is female, is nature, and is the better part of civilization, even though a masculine civilization, "Signor," spurns "her." The leopard, conscious of her "spotted" gown and her "tawny" customs, remains outside society. But the unmitigated delight the leopard felt in her Asia and her palm disappears; she has left nature's realm and only memories remain. Now as a misfit in both worlds, the present civilization and the nature left behind, she feels a pain that "Cannot be stifled--with Narcotic--/
Nor suppressed--with Balm--." But she remains the leopard--instinctive, unpredictable, and powerful.

This poem could relate to Dickinson's sense of her femininity; she finds herself battling in an unnatural masculine environment, without a place. But even though she feels that the masculine civilization shuns her, she describes her femininity as the satin of the deserts or the gold of "Ethiop": her power and worth lie latent, waiting for civilization's recognition. Although Dickinson follows past stereotypes and identifies nature, the leopard, with femininity, she exalts that femininity to the status of precious commodities.
Even the poem's form indicates a type of double-talk. Dickinson alters the ballad form enough to follow traditional poetic styles and also to establish her own unique style. According to traditional forms the poem is actually three ballad stanzas that rhyme "abcb." But Dickinson alters the traditional form in two ways. First, Dickinson separates the first line of the second stanza into two lines and attaches the second stanza onto the first stanza. Second, instead of alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter, Dickinson regularly adds a syllable to the tetrameter lines and subtracts a syllable from the trimeter lines. Just as Dickinson takes the original stereotypes of feminine nature and masculine civilization and alters the meaning to exalt rather than degrade femininity, so she transforms the traditional ballad stanza into a form that becomes an original expression even though she continues to work within an established tradition.

Dickinson shows her awareness of the literary tradition that links nature with femininity and in that linking, lowers femininity beneath masculinity and civilization. In several poems, she attempts to prove that she is a poet, not by surpassing past poets, but by surpassing nature. The key to Dickinson's awareness of literary tradition lies in her use of pronouns. When she identifies a woman speaker with
nature, as in "The morns are meeker than they were" or "God made a little Gentian," Dickinson uses feminine pronouns for nature. But when her speaker transcends nature as a poet in "I send Two Sunsets," Dickinson changes the traditional feminine nature to a masculine one and uses masculine pronouns for nature. To overcome nature, she must make nature "other" than her feminine personae.

Dickinson compares nature and women in several poems, but the women in these poems only passively imitate nature's grandeur and do not actively create poetic representations of nature's glory. In "The morns are meeker than they were--" (#12), Dickinson describes the Fall as if each part of nature creating the scene stepped out of a woman's society. Just as her male predecessors, she personifies nature as a woman or several women: "The Maple wears a gayer scarf--/ The field a scarlet gown." Unlike the male poets, however, her female persona participates as a woman in nature's pageantry--"Lest I should be old fashioned/ I'll put a trinket on." Likewise, Dickinson represents nature as feminine in "God made a little Gentian--" (#442). All the summer laughed at the unflowering Gentian, until the Gentian bloomed when the weather turned cold; then "Summer hid her Forehead--/ And Mockery--was still--." The flower required the frosts and the chill of the north for "her condition." The persona again compares herself to nature, to the
Gentian, asking "Creator--Shall I--bloom?"

Dickinson's personae bloom not in the usual meaning of the metaphor in sexual maturity, but in poetic maturity. Dickinson herself already rivals nature through her poetry, particularly in her descriptions of sunrises and sunsets:

The Day came slow--till Five o'clock--
Then sprang before the Hills
Like Hindered Rubies--or the Light
A Sudden Musket--spills--

The Purple could not keep the East--
The Sunrise shook abroad
Like Breadths of Topaz--packed a Night--
The Lady just unrolled--

The Happy Winds--their Timbrels took--
The Birds--in docile Rows
Arranged themselves around their Prince
The Wind--is Prince of Those--

The Orchard sparkled like a Jew--
How mighty 'twas--to be
A Guest in this stupendous place--
The Parlor--of the Day--

Interestingly, Dickinson seems especially careful to write this poem within the confines of the ballad stanza. She does not vary from the ballad form where the lines alternate between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. She varies the form only in her use of slant rhymes in stanzas 2--"abroad"/ "unrolled"--and 4-- "be"/ "day." Even with this variation, the stanzas rhyme "abcb," as the ballad form requires. If Dickinson believes, as she suggests in another
poem, that "The One who could repeat the Summer day--/ Were
greater than itself," then she may view her descriptions of
nature's activities as important rituals that prove her
poetic worth. If she did indeed believe that her
repetitions of nature caused her to surpass nature and to
prove her poetic strength, then she may feel these
descriptions required greater adherence to traditional form.

Dickinson does use all her descriptive powers to
recreate the sunrise in this poem. She describes nature's
activity with energetic verbs--"sprang," "spills," "shook,"
"took," "sparkled." The literal sound is the birds in the
wind singing like the tinkling of timbrels, but the
metaphoric sound is in the explosion of the sky's
color--like "the Light/ A Sudden Musket--spills--." Dickinson
paints the sky with the rich colors of rubies,
topaz, and majestic purple, and continues the metaphor of
riches when she describes the orchard's dew as the sparkle
of the jewelry on a wealthy Jew. She captures the
brilliance of the sunrise through the brilliance of words.
But even during her competition with nature, Dickinson
retains her femininity. She compares the speaker's presence
in the sunrise to a guest's presence in a parlor.

In a pair of poems, Dickinson indicates that anyone,
males or females, who can capture the essence of nature's
moments can overcome a passive identification with nature.
In the first poem, "The One who could repeat the Summer day," the speaker celebrates the "man" who can recreate nature:

The One who could repeat the Summer day--
Were greater than itself--though He
Minutest of Mankind should be--

And He--could reproduce the Sun--
At period of going down--
The Lingering--and the Stain--I mean--

When Orient have been outgrown--
And Occident--become Unknown--
His Name--remain-- (#307)

Dickinson describes the poet who could reproduce a summer day or a sunset as "greater than" nature's event; after nature's glory dissipates, "His Name--remain--." Although here she discusses the poet with the masculine gender, Dickinson has herself recreated many summer days ("There came a day at summer's full" [#322]) and many scenes of the sun's setting or rising. She seems reluctant to speak of herself, a woman, as overcoming her feminine tie with nature except indirectly.

Indirectly, however, she does. In the very next poem, "I send Two Sunsets," she playfully describes the competition a woman speaker and the day held in creating sunsets:
I send Two Sunsets--
Day and I--in competition ran--
I finished Two--and several Stars--
While He--was making One--

His own was ampler--but as I
Was saying to a friend--
Mine--is the more convenient
To Carry in the Hand--

The casualness of the poem's tone, as if the speaker were writing a letter, tempers the speaker's audacity that she can send someone "two sunsets" that she created while nature created one. Dickinson changes nature's gender in this poem from feminine to masculine. She does not want her speaker who competes with nature to identify with nature. When juxtaposed with "The One who could repeat the Summer day--," this poem indicates that even a woman can actively transcend nature as a poet rather than just passively identify herself with nature as a woman.

As Dickinson often does, Rossetti usually follows tradition and associates nature with women, particularly in her descriptions of flowers, when she personifies flowers' attributes with women's characteristics. She also associates women speakers' moods with nature's changes. In "The First Spring Day" (1855), the persona wants to rejuvenate a hopeful response to life as nature begins to quicken after winter: "Sing, voice of Spring, / Till I too blossom and rejoice and sing." In our language, only women
can "blossom" as nature does.

But frequently Rossetti moves to alter this stereotype that restricts women to the natural processes of nature. In "May" (1855), two women converse about Spring. Rossetti often uses two sisters or two women to show opposing views, possibly two sides fighting within her own self. In "May," one woman sees life as dead, while the other finds him (Rossetti personifies nature as a male in this poem) blossoming around and within her:

'Sweet Life is dead.'--'Not so:
I meet him day by day,
Where bluest fountains flow
And trees are white as snow,
For it is time of May.
Even now from long ago
He will not say me nay.
He is most fair to see:
And if I wander forth, I know
He wanders forth with me.'

'But Life is dead to me:
The worn-out year was failing,
West winds took up a wailing
To watch his funeral:
Bare poplars shivered tall
And lank vines stretched to see.
'Twixt him and me a wall
Was frozen of earth-like stone
With brambles overgrown:
Chill darkness wrapped him like a pall,
And I am left alone.'

'How can you call him dead?
He buds out everywhere:
In every hedgerow rank,
On every moss-grown bank,
I find him here and there.
He crowns my willing head
With May-flowers white and red,
The one woman responds to nature as Rossetti's childlike persona does in her children's verse—with a sense of joy over nature's abundance and beauty. But this persona responds as a woman. She speaks of her "willing head" and rejoices with the budding and bearing of nature's blossoms. The imagery suggests that she responds to the male community (a male nature) with willingness to accept her own ability to bud and bear. She shares an ambiance with nature which causes her plants to bear and in turn blossoms where she treads.

The other woman, however, perceives herself as barren and alienated from nature. Nature neither buds nor bears for her; instead, she images nature in "bare poplars," "lank vines," and "brambles," even though she looks at the month of May also. She sees internally and projects her barrenness upon an external world. Instead of the words emphasizing positively birth and new life, the words emphasize the negative, suggesting death and failure: "failing," "wailing," "funeral," "frozen," "chill," "darkness," and "pall." Her own vision cuts her off, walls her in, and places her in this unnatural state, "alone."

Despite the second woman's negativity, she reveals
herself as outside the traditional stereotype. Possibly, she cannot so readily identify with the natural processes of spring and birth, because she does not have the same relationship with the male community as the speaker in the first and third stanzas. As a single woman (she says she lives alone), she fails to fit the stereotype of the woman who buds and bears along with nature. To her, nature responds not as a warm cohort, but as a cold and distant force. Rossetti places the single women on the same plane as men in their physical identification with nature, but she treats the experience as a negative rather than a positive one for these women. Those who do not fit the stereotype fail as women.

In "Ourselves were wed one summer--dear--," Dickinson also pictures two women, one married and one unmarried, to explore the stereotype of the blooming and budding wife. Dickinson, however, speaks more positively of the woman to whom nature remains cold and distant rather than warm and blossoming:

Ourselves were wed one summer--dear--
Your vision--was in June--
And when Your little Lifetime failed,
I wearied--too--of mine--

And overtaken in the Dark--
Where You had put me down--
By Some one carrying a Light--
I--too--received the Sign.
'Tis true--Our Futures different lay--
Your Cottage--faced the sun--
While Oceans--and the North must be--
On every side of mine

'Tis true, Your Garden led the Bloom,
For mine--in Frosts--was sown--
And, yet, one Summer, we were Queens--
But You--were crowned in June--

Dickinson uses wedding and vision interchangeably in this poem. Both the poetic speaker and her friend were "wed" one summer. Her friend's "vision" happened in June, the month for weddings. The first two stanzas that describe the circumstances of the summer abstrusely refer to unknown circumstances. One reading of these first two stanzas might infer that the speaker never actually married, but felt deserted and "put down" when her friend married in June. She saw her friend's marriage as a type of failure, since she herself remained behind in the dark, until the speaker receives her own "vision" or "sign." (Maybe for Dickinson such a sign might be a discovery of a personal vocation, different, but just as meaningful as wifehood and motherhood.)

The final two stanzas enact the result of both women's visions. Her friend's world faces warmth and blooming gardens. The speaker, however, faces only the chill of the North, frosty gardens, and the isolation of surrounding oceans. The difference between the worlds of these two
women resembles the difference between Rossetti's two women in "May." Unlike Rossetti's speaker, however, who fails when she doesn't fit traditional stereotypes, Dickinson's speaker, even though she feels chill and isolation, remains confident about the worth of her own sign. The speaker, although her experience differed from her friend's marriage, also crowned herself a queen who received a special sign.

But casting off stereotypes remains difficult for both poets. As I have mentioned, both poets continue to define women with nature's attributes and to personify nature as feminine. In the poems where their women personae transcend nature, such as "Civilization--spurns--the Leopard," "Ourselves were wed one summer--dear," and "May," each woman experiences a loss or pain. Springtime seems especially painful, possibly because the women who break out of the stereotypes break first out of the traditional roles of wife and lover. (See also Dickinson's "I dreaded that first Robin, so," (#348) and "The Morning after Woe--" (#364), and Rossetti's "Life and Death" (p. 358) for other examples of women's pain in Spring.) The simple pleasures of Spring, nature's birthing time, become forbidden pleasures to the nineteenth-century single woman.

But although neither Dickinson nor Rossetti cultivated a garden bower of love for husbands or lovers, they cultivated a unique feminine love poetry. Both write ecstatic love
poetry, but the majority of both poets' love poetry stems from the lyric tradition of unrequited love. They uniquely write poetry of unrequited love since they write of the woman's perspective in such affairs. Previous women poets wrote of perfect love; Anne Bradstreet composed love poems "To My Dear and Loving Husband" and Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her *Sonnets From the Portuguese* wrote "How Do I Love Thee? Let Me Count the Ways."

In fact, both Dickinson and Rossetti seem to want consciously to show the opposite of Barrett Browning's happy love poems. Dickinson's opening line in one poem of a series of unrequited love poems echoes Barrett Browning's "How Do I Love Thee?" but reveals a more painful love:

"Why do I love You, Sir?  
Because--
The Wind does not require the Grass
To answer--Wherefore when He pass
She cannot keep Her place.

Because He knows--and
Do not You--
And We know not--
Enough for Us
The Wisdom it be so--

The Lightning--never asked an Eye
Wherefore it shut--when He was by--
Because He knows it cannot speak--
And reasons not contained--
--Of Talk--
There be--preferred by Daintier Folk--

The Sunrise--Sir--compelleth Me--
Because He's Sunrise--and I see--
Therefore--Then--
Instead of describing the fullness, steadiness, and commitment of her love with confidence of this love's acceptance and return, the speaker timidly lists the reasons why she loves with metaphors of the helpless and silent attraction of a weaker element for one stronger. She loves automatically just as the grass bends to the wind or the eye shuts to lightning. The speaker represents the passive and immobile element in nature, the rooted grass, while the male loved one (to whom the speaker respectfully refers to as "Sir") represents the powerful, mobile, and active elements of nature, the wind and the lightning. Because she loves automatically, the speaker becomes overwhelmed when she must express the reasons for her love. Dickinson mirrors the speaker's flabbergasted state in the poem's meter. The lines move rhythmically in iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter, then break unexpectedly into lines of one, two, three, four, or five syllables. Particularly the jolting rhythm and expressions in stanza 2 enact the speaker's dumbfounded condition and embarrassment in love.

Although Dickinson seems in these love poems to reinforce the woman's passive position and second class status, other poems and her own letters reveal the tongue-in-cheek quality of her statements on love.
Dickinson expresses the attraction and repulsion of marriage when she writes at 22 to her future sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson:

How dull our lives must seem to the bride, and the plighted maiden, whose days are fed with gold, and who gathers pearls every evening; but to the wife, Susie, sometimes the wife forgotten, our lives perhaps seem dearer than all others in the world; you have seen flowers at morning, satisfied with the dew, and those same sweet flowers at noon with their heads bowed in anguish before the mighty sun; think you these thirsty blossoms will now need naught but—dew? No, they will cry for sunlight, and pine for the burning noon, tho' it scorcheth them, scatheth them; they have got through with peace—they know that the man of noon, is mightier than the morning and their life is henceforth to him. Oh, Susie, it is dangerous, and it is all too dear, those simple trusting spirits, and the spirits mightier, which we cannot resist! It does so rend me, Susie, the thought of when it comes, that I tremble lest I, too, am yielded up (L. #93).

The power and attraction as well as the danger and pain involved in a marital or even love relationship reveal Dickinson's fears about the influence of the "man of noon." Interestingly, Dickinson refers to herself and other women as flowers, members of nature rooted to the earth and immobile. She clumps all masculinity together as the sun, also a part of nature, put a part, such as the wind and the lightning, that transcends the earth while also remaining part of the world. The sun gives life and nourishes fertility and growth. Dickinson describes women as "crying"
and "pining" for this life-giving force from the masculine sun. She indicates that physical desires determine marriage; women "cannot resist" marriage because women yearn for physical fertility and procreation.

But while these women thirst and crave for the masculine life-force, this masculinity "burns," "scorches," and "scathes" them. Life or the creation of life becomes for these women self-obliteration. Marriage both attracts and repulses Dickinson: "it is dangerous, and it is all too dear." The danger and fear of self-obliteration tempers her desire for physical fertility.

Her poetic portraits of love, then, reveal the destructiveness of stereotypes that obliterate a woman's identity. Her personae become pitiful as they try to fit into society's mold of the self-effacing woman in love:

The Drop, that wrestles in the Sea--
Forgets her own locality--
As I--toward Thee--

She knows herself an incense small--
Yet small--she sighs--if All--is All--
How larger--be?

The Ocean--smiles--at her Conceit--
But she, forgetting Amphitrite--
Pleads--"Me"? ($)284)

Again this persona pleads for recognition from a strong masculine presence, even if this recognition means
self-obliteration like the disappearance of a drop of water's individuality in the ocean. But despite her pleading, she "wrestles" against such extinction. Stanza 2 indicates that she desires to join with the ocean because she wants growth and power. She dislikes her size and sighs at her smallness. If she cannot have power and greatness on her own, she chooses surrogate strength by joining with the ocean, even if through the choice she loses her own individuality. The persona belongs to a group of women who create themselves out of their husbands' identity; even as late as 1965, the psychologist Erik Erikson writes how "young women often ask, whether they can 'have an identity' before they know whom they will marry and for whom they will make a home."  

But this persona considers that she possesses very few choices. Either she marries and becomes part of the ocean or she remains a drop. Even the ocean smiles at her "conceit" that she could imagine becoming larger on her own. At his smile, she forgets her visions of greatness, of Amphitrite, goddess of the sea and wife of Poseidon, and pleads for attention. Notice how the speaker's visions of greatness, of Amphitrite who is a goddess in her own right, transforms into a vision of wifehood since Amphitrite is the wife of Poseidon. The curtained stanzas and shortened third line in each stanza enact the speaker's own sense of
smallness and unimportance. But Dickinson shows in this poem, as she does in others such as "What Thou dost—is Delight" (#725), the inequity of a system that requires a woman to grovel for love just to attain growth and importance, especially since the growth obliterates her own individuality. Instead of using the lyric poem of unrequited love to show the cruelty or distance or charms of the beloved woman, Dickinson uses the form and wittingly or unwittingly shows the cruelty or dangers of society's placement of women in love situations.

Rossetti also expands from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's perspective to emphasize the flip side to Barrett Browning's happiness and pleasure in love. In fact, Rossetti mentions in her short preface to her sonnet sequence, "Monna Innominata" (1882) how differently Barrett Browning would have written her sonnets if Barrett Browning had not discovered a perfect match in love: "Or had the Great Poetess of our own day and nation only been unhappy instead of happy, her circumstances would have invited her to bequeath to us, in lieu of the 'Portuguese Sonnets,' an inimitable 'donna innominata' drawn not from fancy but from feeling, and worthy to occupy a niche beside Beatrice and Laura" (p. 58). Rossetti proposes in her preface that her sonnet sequence gives Beatrice and Laura, and all the other women who were objects of a male sonneteer, a voice.
Rossetti follows Dante's and Petrarch's format when she moves through different stages and events of the love affair. She writes 15 sonnets and precedes each sonnet with two quotations, one from Dante's sonnets on Beatrice and one from Petrarch's sonnets on Laura. She gives the woman a voice, but instead of seeing a cruel, heartless, or distant woman, we see a selfless persona who is, as Dickinson's, willing to give up her own identity for the sake of a male lover:

Thinking of you, and all that was, and all
That might have been and now can never be,
I feel your honoured excellence, and see
Myself unworthy of the happier call;
For woe is me who walk so apt to fall,
So apt to shrink afraid, so apt to flee,
Apt to lie down and die (ah woe is me!)
Faithless and hopeless turning to the wall.
And yet not hopeless quite nor faithless quite,
Because not loveless; love may toil all night,
But take at morning; wrestle till the break
Of day, but then wield power with God and man:--
So take I heart of grace as best I can,
Ready to spend and be spent for your sake. (p. 61)

Rossetti uses meter effectively to emphasize the speaker's emotions and actions. The initial trochee reinforces the continuousness of the speaker's thoughts on the past relationship. Instead of writing, "I think of you," she writes "Thinking of you" and makes the speaker's act more significant through the metrical change. The first octave
compares the male's "honoured excellence" with her own unworthiness. She describes herself as passive and ineffective: she cannot walk without falling, act without shrinking fearfully or fleeing as a coward flees. Again, Rossetti effectively uses an initial trochee in line 8 to strengthen the speaker's desperate feeling of contrast between his "honoured excellence" and her own unworthiness:

"Faithless and hopeless turning to the wall."

Rossetti uses the turn into the sestet to bring a spark of hope into the speaker's desperation. But this hope brings small solace since it only hinges on the slight possibility that love may again recur after a "night" of troubles. In the meantime, the speaker remains "Ready to spend and be spent for your sake." Love destroys the speaker's own sense of worth and leaves her waiting and hoping for further destruction.

Other sonnets in this sequence reinforce the double quality of the work. Rossetti seems to reveal a woman who is selfless in her love, but this selflessness hinges on self-destruction. Sonnet #5 in "Monna Innominata" ends with the surety that she will love him "Today, tomorrow, world without an end/ . . . Since woman is the help meet made for man." But then Rossetti shows in the rest of the sonnet sequence how destructive this unequitable love is to the woman who must remain willing "to spend and be spent for"
the man's sake. She dreams in sonnet #7 that they might "stand/ As happy equals in the flowering land / Of love," but then that sonnet, just as the rest of the sonnet sequence, enacts the inequality of their love's reality. She completely cedes any rights for her own happiness, and in sonnet #12, she admits that her only rights and pleasures stem from his rights and pleasures, even if his pleasure desires another woman over herself. Rossetti pictures the stereotype of the selfless angel, but in so doing, she shows the destructiveness of this role for women.

Rossetti's "The Prince's Progress" (1865) further enacts the insufficiency of the selfless, passive, and patient woman as a role model for others to follow. This long narrative parodies Tennyson's narrative, "The Princess" (1847). Tennyson attempts in "The Princess" to show how women misdirect their efforts toward equality. Tennyson's princess finds herself in error because she tries to open a college strictly for women where women learn all that men learn. Tennyson comments that this effort fails because a woman should not by nature act as man acts: "For woman is not undeveloped man,/ But diverse. Could we make her as the man,/ Sweet love were slain; his dearest bond is this,/ Not like to like, but like in difference." And Tennyson views love, not a woman's pursuit of knowledge, as the woman's truest pursuit. At the end of the poem, when the princess
falls in love with the prince, "Her falser self slipt from
her like a robe,/ And left her woman." In love, a woman
fulfills her purpose since she completes and rounds out
man's imperfections: "Each fulfills/ Defect in each, and
always thought in thought,/ Purpose in purpose, will in
will, they grow,/ The single pure and perfect animal,/ The
two-cell'd heart beating, with one full stroke,/ Life." Ac
According to Tennyson, a woman becomes equal to man when,
because of love, a woman marries a man and becomes one with
him. Any other pursuit for equality, such as an equal
education, destroys love by destroying the difference
between men and women.

Rossetti's "The Prince's Progress," on the other hand,
enacts the effects upon a woman who lives and dies while
waiting for a prince who never shows up. Rossetti's
colorless princess lacks the rebelliousness that gives
Tennyson's princess her lively character. Instead,
Rossetti's princess willingly accepts Tennyson's maxim that
women fulfill themselves through love and marriage. We
actually see little of Rossetti's princess. She opens the
poem with her weeping for her tardy prince and closes the
poem with her death. She transforms from a waiting bride at
the poem's opening to a dead grey-haired woman who wasted
away her life, caring only for the prince who never comes.
Rossetti's princess should have worked toward equality,
learned what men learn, and built her life without him.

Instead she waits to start her life until her prince comes and provides her with a life. And what a prince. Rossetti spends the majority of the poem tracing "the prince's progress" and satirizing him in the process. The prince controls their union, since only he has the freedom of mobility, but he forfeits the match by his irresponsible actions. When he finally decides to leave, he plans to meet his bride before nightfall. But on his way, he becomes distracted by a beautiful maiden--"A wave-haired milkmaid, rosy and white;/ The Prince, who had journeyed at least a mile,/ Grew athirst at the sight"; by the harshness of the land over which he must travel--"A lifeless land, a loveless land/. . . Untrodden before, untrodden since;/ Tédious land for a social Prince"; and finally by his curiosity and greed over an ancient man stirring an elixir of life. The Prince lingers to obtain some of this drink of life, but once he obtains some, he is "prompt to crave/ Sleep on the ground."

He begins again with a new energy--"Started though late"--but then comes across a beautiful landscape where he "Loitered a while for a deep stream bath,/ Yawned for a fellow-man." He finds a stream, but it becomes rough and he nearly drowns. He's rescued by beautiful maidens and stays with them so long that by the time he starts again, he arrives at his bride's home, not in time for her wedding,
but just in time for her funeral. Rossetti's poem cries out in response to Tennyson's that marriage may work well for some women, but must other women waste away their lives while waiting for such a marriage?

Women's immobility characterizes the suffering women in the work of both Dickinson and Rossetti. Only the male figure physically moves in the love poems. The "imprisoned" and stationary women can only wait for their lover. Joanne Feit Diehl explains how this idea of male mobility and female immobility worked for the Romantic poets:

If the romantics assumed the poet to be a mental 'hero,' transferring the metaphor of the quest to the vocation of the poet, then the role of the woman was to wait, to taunt the poet with visions of bliss and, if he were lucky, possibly to lead him beyond the confines of the human into a realm of spiritual awakening accompanied by the punishment of death.

Dickinson and Rossetti as female poets transform the traditional roles of the male quester and the female, stationary muse. Dickinson and Rossetti use these traditional roles of the sexes, but each poet treats these roles ironically. In one sense they do express their need for this wandering male lover as the women in their poetry pine away waiting for him. But Dickinson and Rossetti show how this need actually self-destructs a woman's individuality and self-respect. On a more positive note,
according to Diehl's analysis, Dickinson's and Rossetti's personae do not need the male for their stationary "quests." The women hold the cards to death and spiritual awakening. With the abandonment of the domineering male figure, the woman frees herself for her own self-assertion and transcendence. The strong male quester becomes a type of muse in that he acts as a catalyst for the female poet's self-assertion: she needs his presence to reject him. She can recreate the stasis of immobility and instead of cultivating a Garden of Eden for the fulfillment of man's desires, she can begin to cultivate in her stasis her own self-creation.

Rossetti's princess does not create a very colorful self in the absence of male dominance, but she does die and enter a spiritual realm before the male quester arrives. Dickinson's personae, in a similar way, discover transcendence through male absence. Dickinson's irony in her poems lies in her ambiguous phrasing, particularly in her use of the night. In "I envy Seas, whereon He rides---" (§498), Dickinson envies all the parts of nature that can stay close to her love and "That gaze upon His journey---," something that for she in her immobility "is forbidden utterly/ As Heaven." These first four stanzas are clear; the final stanza confuses the meaning of the poem:
Yet interdict—my Blossom—
And abrogate—my Bee—
Lest Noon in Everlasting Night—
Drop Gabriel—and Me—

Does this stanza mean that she fears "remaining 'in
Everlasting Night'" if she is kept from her lover as Inder
Nath Kher suggests? I'm not so sure. In that case, she
would be asking some unknown authority to prohibit her
"blossom" (her sexuality?) and to cancel her "bee" (her
wandering male lover?) for her fear that "Noon" (God?) will
drop her into everlasting night. But why also would he drop
Gabriel, God's angel who told Mary that she was pregnant
with God's son? Possibly, she asks not for prohibition,
but explains its occurrence—(You) prohibit my sexuality and
(you) cancel my lover or keep him from me because of your
fear of me and Gabriel in the everlasting night. The
inexact wording blurs any clear meaning, but the phrasing
implies that she will not have her wandering lover and will
somehow because of that situation leave (the burning?) noon
for everlasting night.

Maybe the meaning of the ambiguity becomes clearer when
juxtaposed with another poem, "The Daisy follows soft the
Sun—" (#106).

The Daisy follows soft the Sun—
And when his golden walk is done—
Sits shyly at his feet—
He--waking--finds the flower there--
Wherefore--Marauder--art thou here?
Because, Sir, love is sweet!

We are the Flower--Thou the Sun!
Forgive us, if as days decline--
We nearer steal to Thee!
Enamored of the parting West--
The peace--the flight--the Amethyst--
Night's possibility!

This poem recalls the images in Dickinson's letter to Sue. The woman as an immobile flower waits for love at the feet of the burning "man of noon." At first this poem seems to hope for the sexual pleasures of the night. But as Gilbert and Gubar point out, "Since the solar god is withdrawn at night, night's possibility, though triumphantly sensual for a human being, can only be abandonment for a flower. At the same time, if night is the interval when the repressive solar Nobodaddy relaxes his constraints, its possibility for a poet may be self-assertion." This suggestion that nig: provides a woman with the secret freedom for self-assertion seems to be particularly true if we recall Dickinson's letter to Susan Gilbert; the flowers "pine for the burning noon; 'tho it scorches them." Nighttime, then, away from this torture is "The peace--the flight--the Amethyst--." As woman, Dickinson may fear the abandonment of "Everlasting Night" with the night's darkness, loss of sight, and loneliness, but as poet this may be her time for
transcendence, her time with Gabriel, God's messenger, who may impregnate her not with God's son but with a sense of the spiritual realm.

Both Dickinson and Rossetti use women's traditional roles when they write their poetry, but unlike male writers such as Tennyson who shows traditional roles and blending of identities in a good light, both women show these traditional roles as ineffective and destructive for women. Although each uses traditional formulas herself, both poets find that the metaphors which define women with nature's attributes or personify nature as feminine restrict and falsify the possibilities for single women or career oriented women. Dickinson and Rossetti both show how despite previous reports from Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Tennyson, love does not fulfill a woman, but rather threatens her individuality and self-respect. Of course, both poets do write joyous love poems (see especially Rossetti's "A Birthday" (1857) and "A Pause" (1853) and Dickinson's "Come slowly--Eden!" (#211)), but the personae's joy arises from an anticipation of the lover; his presence brings only pain. But Dickinson and Rossetti cultivate the pain, domination, and immobility that they find in a woman's traditional place in love and create poetry. As Dickinson suggests, out of domination comes a voice:
Bind me—I still can sing—
Banish—my mandolin
Strikes true within—

Slay—and my Soul shall Rise—
Chanting to Paradise—
Still thine— (**1005**)
Notes for Chapter 2


2 For an opposite viewpoint, see Joanne Feit Diehl, "'Come Slowly Eden': An Exploration of Women Poets and Their Muse" for her theory on how a strong male figure who is both father and lover acts as a muse for Dickinson, Rossetti, and Barrett Browning. For the theory that Dickinson was not attracted heterosexually to a male figure but homosexually to a female one, see Lillian Faderman, "Emily Dickinson's Letters to Sue Gilbert," *Massachusetts Review*, 18, No. 2 (Summer 1977), 197-225 and Rebecca Patterson, *The Riddle of Emily Dickinson*, 1951


8 Alfred Lord Tennyson, "The Princess," in *The Poems and Plays of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, ed., Bennett Cerf and Donald


Walls: Flight From Boundaries

I cannot ope to every one who taps,
And let the draughts come whistling through my hall;
Come bounding and surrounding me,
Nipping and clipping through my wraps and all.
I wear my mask for warmth.
--Christina Rossetti, "Winter: My Secret"

Still! Could themself have peeped--
And seen my Brain--go round--
They might have lodged a Bird
For Treason
--Emily Dickinson, #613

Since propriety confined Rossetti and Dickinson to the home, I wondered if enclosed space played a factor in their poetry. Enclosed space indeed plays a factor; both women's poetry abounds in walls, fences, windows, masks, and enclosures. Not only do enclosures mark boundaries and restrict physical movement for their women personae, but also punishments for women who violate boundaries restrict free emotional and intellectual movement as well. Sometimes, these restrictions protect their personae, but more often their personae perceive walls and boundaries as frustrating barriers. Birds become important symbols for both poets. Birds can fly to the heavens, but man can restrict their freedom to fly by caging them. These women, just as a domesticated bird, can sing in the comfort and
protection of the cage, but they desire the freedom to fly without restrictions.

In many poems, both poets will conform to traditional poetic forms and methods. But often they write, as Higginson and Ruskin accused them, with erratic meter and stanzaic form. The poets acknowledge and understand traditional poetic practices since they frequently follow these standards themselves. They must write unconventionally not out of ignorance but out of intention. Possibly, they find one way to break down male traditions and boundaries by changing and creating metrical rules.

Dickinson succeeds more than Rossetti does in her metrical experiments. Rossetti fails, particularly in her longer poems, because her erratic meter hinders rather than enhances the poem's enactment of meaning. Rossetti's better poems contain traditional poetic forms and meters. Dickinson, on the other hand, formulates a regularity in her irregularity. Dickinson starts with the ballad form and adds or subtracts syllables to suit her meaning. Often Dickinson's alternate forms shorten lines and, thus, work within the poems' meanings. For instance, the shorter lines may reflect the speaker's reticence and self-effacement (conditions common to her personae). But for both poets, who demonstrate an understanding of traditional poetic forms in several poems, aberrations of traditional forms may
assert their poetic freedom in a society that allows them few freedoms.

The nineteenth-century women possessed few intellectual, as well as physical, freedoms. Although women may seek out protected enclosures for child rearing, as Eric Erikson postulates, the woman who does not need a protected enclosure "within which maternal care can flourish" may feel restricted by imposed enclosures. Simone de Beauvoir explains how women in a paternal society can feel imprisoned:

> the sphere to which [a woman] belongs is everywhere enclosed, limited, dominated by the male universe: high as she may raise herself, far as she may venture, there will always be a ceiling over her head, walls that block her way."

Dickinson's and Rossetti's ambivalence toward the enclosures in their poetry derives from their insecurity as women poets; as women, they may desire protection, but as poets, they resent limitations. The physical walls in their poetry symbolize psychological male domination that restricts intellectual as well as physical freedom. In fact, both poets describe punishment for those women who indulge themselves outside the boundaries established by a paternal society.

In their own lives, Dickinson and Rossetti felt the
sting of stepping beyond set boundaries. Virginia Woolf explains that this feeling results from society's contradictory definitions for "woman" and "writer":

There was an enormous body of masculine opinion to the effect that nothing could be expected of women intellectually. Even if her father did not read out loud these opinions, any girl could read them for herself; and the reading, even in the nineteenth century, must have lowered her vitality, and told profoundly upon her work.3

Dickinson's and Rossetti's expressed need for punishment in their poetry might have arisen from an unwilling belief in the truth of these intellectual boundaries which they "wrongfully" crossed through their work.

Although Dickinson's father encouraged her education, Dickinson felt her inferiority as a woman scholar. She wrote several letters to her brother Austin in "serious" fun exalting his status as a male and demeaning hers as a female. When she wrote to her cousin Frances Norcross, who had apparently been buying several books, Dickinson gave Frances an excuse to use in case the owner of The Burnham Antique Shop might have thought that she was (of all the worst things!) a "scholastic female":

"Burnham" must think Fanny a scholastic female. I wouldn't be in her place! If she feels delicate about it, she can tell him the books are for a friend in the East Indies. (L, #225)
Dickinson lightheartedly teased her cousin in this letter, but she stressed the devalued position of a woman's place. Dickinson expressed her relief that she was not in Fanny's "place," that is, as a woman who had to explain her intellectual curiosity. But if Fanny must endure the ordeal of explaining her interest in books, she could lie that the books were for a friend in the "East Indies," as if only in an exotic place could women properly show an interest in books. Because in these early letters Dickinson spoke jokingly about "female propriety & sedate deportment" (L, #22), she revealed her discomfort with what she perceived as society's boundaries for women; boundaries that she herself decided to cross.

Rossetti seldom expressed her own feelings of inferiority for being a woman who, such as Dickinson, did not want to choose the accepted realm of domesticity. But through her veil of poetry, we can detect her displeasure. In the poem, "From the Antique" (1854), Rossetti's persona imagines that she might be better off as a man: "It's a weary life, it is, she said:--/ Doubly blank in a woman's lot:/ I wish and I wish I were a man" (p. 312). Rossetti rarely addressed outright without the veil of fantasy, allegory, or Christian discontent at a vain world, her
unhappiness in society as a single woman. When she did just that in her longer narrative, "The Lowest Room" (1856), her older brother, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, complained about the poem's tone:

A real taint, to some extent, of modern vicious style ... always seemed to me much too prominent in the long piece called The Lowest Room. Everything in which this tone appears is utterly foreign to your primary impulses. ... If I were you I should rigidly keep guard on this matter if you write in the future; and ultimately exclude from your writings everything (or almost everything) so tainted.

Dante Gabriel always encouraged her to write, but he did not want her to write indecorously (odd advice from someone accused of writing in the "fleshly" school of poetry). In his criticism of the poem, Dante Gabriel did not make clear how he found the poem tainted, but possibly he objected to the subject. The poem concerns two sisters: one who happily marries and bears children, and one who unhappily tolerates her status as a single woman in the lowest place of society. The unhappy woman views this society as unheroic and passionless. She hopes only for heaven, where "many last be first." Nina Auerbach sees this poem moving "through conventional lament to visions of heroism and of ultimate, militant victory. ... The pagan immediacy of her early hope becomes the apocalyptic faith of her last: pious
patience does not subdue heroic selfhood, but validates it. Contra
try to Dante Gabriel's criticism of his sister's "tainted" poem, this tone of rebellion and discontent over a single woman's place in society demonstrated exactly Rossetti's primary impulse—an impulse, however, that she fought to suppress for her entire life.

Possibly as a consequence of fearing or receiving punishment for breaking boundaries, both poets concentrated in their verse on suffering women. Critics speak of Dickinson's and Rossetti's suffering in Promethean terms: that is, as the artist whose creativity brings life, but who must suffer punishment for his efforts. Barbara J. Williams says of Dickinson's poetry: "A gifted woman who is honest to the impulses within her and at the same time is aware of the limitations pressed upon her from without can produce an art that truly reflects the human condition. The Promethean voice of the woman artist can speak for all, both female and male." Dolores Rosenblum, on the other hand, says of Rossetti's poetry: "The myth of suffering for art's sake—Promethean, egoistic, male—is overlaid by the myth of suffering for its own sake—Christian, selfless, female."

To some extent, both critics describe both poets. Rossetti often honestly expressed rage and rebellion, and Dickinson's poetry revered selfless, female suffering. But Rossetti, more often, wrote with an awareness "of the
limitations pressed upon her from without" and struggled to guide her poetry and her life to conform to those limitations. Dickinson, on the other hand, used these limitations to create poetry of rebellion and to exalt herself as a suffering Promethean artist. While Rossetti seemed to want merely to survive through renunciation, Dickinson "means to triumph through renunciation." Mossberg suggests that Dickinson "renounces the satisfactions of a 'normal' adult existence to create pain—-and art." Thus in her work, Dickinson exhibits suffering both triumphant (male, Promethean) and renunciatory (female, Christian) qualities. Rossetti's art also came out of her pain and conflict, but she didn't announce her victory over this pain by exalting her poetic accomplishment as Dickinson did. Rather, Rossetti cloaks her rebellion and indulgence in fantasy or dreams and finds resolutions in the accepted forms of female behavior—marriage and Christianity. Possibly Dickinson felt more of a need to exalt herself as a poet and Rossetti less of a need, because society did not acknowledge Dickinson as a poet and did acknowledge Rossetti as one. In any case, both poets' work display boundaries and punishment—whether divine, societal, or internal—for violations of restrictions.

Rossetti addresses not so much the restrictions on a
woman poet, as the restrictions on women in general. The single woman's punishment for sexual indulgence particularly bothers Rossetti. In poems concerning unwed mothers, Rossetti depicts the women as actively suffering and the men as absent, non-caring, and non-suffering. Rossetti always takes the woman's point of view, possibly because she empathized with their position; she worked for ten years (1860-1870) at the House of Charity at Highgate, a penitentiary for "fallen women" run by Anglican nuns. None of Rossetti's letters from this period that comment on her charity work survive, but she wrote several poems during this time on "fallen" women.

In these poems, the men destroy the woman's and the child's reputation, while the women create life, personality, and love. Their children, the source of their anguish and punishment, are also their pride, their creations. In "Cousin Kate" (1859), a "great lord" discovers two "cottage maidens." He lures away the one maiden, the poem's speaker, as his plaything and his love: "He wore me like a golden knot,/ He changed me like a glove:/ So now I moan an unclean thing/Who might have been a dove" (p. 347). He marries the other woman, Kate, after he casts away the first woman: "The neighbours call you good and pure,/ Call me an outcast thing." The wife justly remains barren, while the fallen woman produces a son: "My
fair-haired son, my shame, my pride,/ Cling closer, closer yet:/ Your sire would give broad lands for one/ To wear his coronet." Rossetti often uses two women to reveal society's boundaries—one woman remains safe within the boundaries, while the other resides outside boundaries in shame.

But Rossetti sympathizes with the outcast and questions the fairness of the man's immunity from punishment. In a longer narrative, "The Iniquity of the Fathers upon the Children" (1865), the daughter discovers that she is the illegitimate child of her benefactress. When she learns the truth, she does not blame her mother; she blames her father, as the title suggests—"The Iniquity of the Fathers upon the Children." This poem is one of Rossetti's longer and less successful poems. Instead of writing her long narrative in blank verse or in formal stanzas, Rossetti writes in stichic iambic trimeter, but even that regularity falls whimsically into four syllables or bumps unrhythmically to seven syllables. The short lines lend a choppy and lighthearted effect to a serious poem. In addition, Rossetti rhymes at random and frequently uses triple rhymes, which also mock the seriousness of her mood.

But despite the technical flaws, the poem remains important since it sheds light on Rossetti's discontent over society's boundaries. The daughter laments her father's actions for the pain he has caused her mother: "Why did he
set his snare/ To catch at unaware/ My Mother's foolish youth,--/ Load me with shame that's hers,/ And her with something worse,/ A lifelong lie for truth?" Rossetti describes the male as the hunter and the female as the innocent hunted. The speaker decides as an illegitimate female that she will not give into the injustice of society's rules and marry to make herself respectable: "I'll not blot out my shame/ With any man's good name;/ But nameless as I stand,/ My hand is my own hand." She only hopes for death and the promise that "'All [will be] equal in the grave.'" In a society that holds women responsible for upholding morality and social standards and thus holds women responsible for sexual deviance, Rossetti behaved radically in her righteous anger on the fallen woman's behalf.

But possibly Rossetti empathized with these women because an intellectually promiscuous female became as much an outcast as a sexually promiscuous female. Gilbert and Gubar suggest that in the nineteenth-century, "genius and sexuality are diseases in women akin to madness." Society could not accept either extreme in a woman who should have acted as a selfless angel. Rossetti writes a more successful poem on the theme of outcast women in her sonnet, "From Sunset to Rise Star" (1865). William Michael Rossetti found penciled in next to the sonnet "From Sunset to Rise
Star," the alternate title, "The House of Charity." He suggests that possibly one of these fallen women speaks in the poem, but then thinks not since the tone of the poem sounds like Rossetti's personal voice. Rossetti probably was speaking both for herself and for these women as social outcasts:

Go from me, summer friends, and tarry not:
I am no summer friend, but wintry cold;
A silly sheep benighted from the fold,
A sluggard with a thorn-choked garden plot.
Take counsel, sever from my lot your lot,
Dwell in your pleasant places, hoard your gold;
Lest you with me should shiver on the wold,
A thirst and hungering on a barren spot.
For I have hedged me with a thorny hedge,
I live alone, I look to die alone.
Yet sometimes when a wind sighs through the sedge
Ghosts of my buried years and friends come back,
My heart goes sighing after swallows flown
On sometime summer's unreturning track. (p. 375)

This Petrarchan sonnet reveals not the crime that broke boundaries, but only the resulting punishment of having to remain outside the protection of those boundaries. In the octave, the persona warns women still within those protected boundaries to remain there. Rossetti emphasizes the persona's earnestness when speaking to these women with initial trochaic feet in lines 1 and 6 and the initial spondaic foot in line 5—"Go from me"; "Take counsel"; "Dwell in your pleasant places." The outcast speaker no
longer builds a Garden of Eden in the home, but resides in a "barren spot" of a "thorn-choked garden plot." Rossetti stresses the heavy misery of this outer area with an internal spondaic foot—"thorn-choked garden plot."

The poem's sestet enacts the speaker's involvement in her own punishment: "For I have hedged me with a thorny hedge." Like the persona of "May," her internal anguish makes even the ever-returning external summer seem to be on an "unreturning track." The punishment, then, derives from the persona's perception of the world as wintery, barren, and thorn-choked; the woman must agree with society's judgments in order to feel the criminality and punishment for the act.

For although Rossetti writes of the injustice of punishment, she also reinforces the validity of boundaries. In another long narrative, "Goblin Market" (1859), Rossetti reinforces female boundaries by ending the poem with female conformity. Rossetti uses the motif that she has used in "May," "The Lowest Room," and "Cousin Kate" of two women who represent two possibilities for all women; that is, one woman fits safely and happily inside society's standards, while the other woman resides precariously and miserably outside conformity in rebellion.

Rossetti composes the "Goblin Market" with an erratic meter and rhyme scheme similar to "The Iniquity of the
Fathers Upon the Children." But the erratic meter and rhymes work in this fantasy of erratic pleasures and indulgences. In the fantasy, two sisters must deal with the temptations of goblins selling forbidden fruit. One sister, Lizzie, resists the temptation, while one sister, Laura, does not resist and must face punishment for indulgence. Laura gives into the sensual attraction of the goblin's fruit: "All ripe together/ In summer weather,--/ Sweet to tongue and sound to eye." The goblins' animal characteristics emphasize that Laura's temptation wells from her physical nature: "One had a cat's face,/ One whisked a tail,/ One tramped at a rat's pace,/ One crawled like a snail,/ One like a wombat prowled obtuse and furry." But by indulging in the pleasures of summer and quenching her hunger and thirst with its fruit, she dwindles into winter, decay, and pain. Her sister Lizzie saves Laura from this punishment by resisting the goblin men's assault when these goblins try to force Lizzie to eat of their fruit. Lizzie doesn't eat, but she brings home the juice of the crushed fruit on her body as an antidote for her sister. Laura drinks the juices on her sister, only now they taste foul to her. The foulness of the juices, which arises from her sister's example of self-sacrifice, cures Laura of her selfish indulgences; Laura receives societal redemption through marriage and child-bearing.
Each sister's approach to nature, to the goblin men, illustrates the differences between them. At first, Laura represents the image of innocence and white purity—she is "Like a rush-imbedded swan, / Like a lily from the beck, / Like a moonlit poplar branch." But she lacks the stoic resignation of Lizzie—Laura is "Like a vessel at the launch / When its last restraint is gone." Germaine Greer rightly describes Laura as "energy" and her sister Lizzie as "inertia and renunciation." When Lizzie meets the goblin men, she too represents innocence, but also stoic restraint: "White and golden Lizzie stood, / Like a lily in a flood,—/ Like a rock of blue-veined stone / Lashed by tides obstreperously,—/ Like a beacon left alone / In a hoary roaring sea." In addition to her stoic restraint, Lizzie acts unselfishly. Laura approaches the goblin men for personal pleasure and satisfaction; Lizzie approaches them to ease her sister's affliction. Only when Laura negates herself and her passion and becomes as selfless as her sister does her cure begin: "Swift fire spread through her veins, knocked at her heart, / Met the fire smouldering there / And overbore its lesser flame; ... Pleasure past and anguish past, / Is it death or is it life? / Life out of death." Once Laura becomes death-like in stoic restraint (without the anguish, but also without the pleasure), she can then begin life anew serving others respectably in
marriage and motherhood.

Laura's crime, then, is more than just sexual passion; her crime is her self-assertion. Rossetti indicates through Jeanie's experience, the sisters' friend who had a similar encounter with the goblins, that the crime with the goblins is a loss of virginity: "She thought of Jeanie in her grave, / Who should have been a bride; / But who for joys brides hope to have / Fell sick and died." But the problem probes deeper than lost virginity. Once the passion consumes Laura, she forgets about her other domestic chores: "She no more swept the house, / Tended the fowls or cows, / Fetched honey, kneaded cakes of wheat, / Brought water from the brook." Winston Weathers believes that Laura and Lizzie combine two sides of one self: Laura becomes mentally ill when she loses contact with reality, but she becomes psychologically integrated when Lizzie "re-enacts the goblin experience, meets it face to face in a kind of therapeutic recognition." But is madness merely deviation from society's norm, and sanity, conformity with society's standards?

Possibly Laura's "madness" evolves only from her self-assertion of individuality, and her return to sanity, from a return to selflessness. Gilbert and Gubar suggest that just as Eve hoped for intellectual divinity, that is, equality with Adam and God, when she ate the forbidden
fruit, so Laura hopes for "an affirmation of intellectual (or poetic) as well as sexual selfhood." Laura's assertion resembles a type of madness until she becomes "angelically selfless" in her domestic duties and her symptoms of genius and sexuality disappear. Unlike Dickinson, Rossetti dramatizes and distances her "anxieties about female art in . . . narratives in which lyric outbursts [are] safely--that is, unobtrusively--embedded." Although Rossetti perceives the injustice of punishment for self-assertive women, she willingly finds solutions, at least in her poetry, through acquiescence to "socially" accepted behavior.

Dickinson's poetry (as Rossetti's) also reveals outcasts who suffer punishment. Unlike Rossetti's personae, however, who reconcile errors in self-effacing conformity, Dickinson's personae affirm the artistic self through punishment. Thus, instead of emphasizing a woman's suffering as selfless and Christian, Dickinson combines the renunciatory suffering of a woman with the Promethean suffering of the artist. Just as Rossetti, Dickinson recognized the importance of renunciation for a woman: she calls renunciation a "piercing Virtue" ($745). But she also says that "Renunciation--is the Choosing/ Against itself--/ Itself to justify/ Unto itself." Dickinson's repetition of "itself" illustrates how renunciation for Dickinson
entangles with selfhood. Just as Rossetti's persona in "From Sunset to Rise Star" enacts her own punishment, so does Dickinson, in her belief in a woman's need for renunciatory choices, create her own fetters for her personae. As a result of those fetters, suffering, in Dickinson's poetry, outweighs ecstasy: "For each ecstatic instant/ We must an anguish pay" (#125).

Dickinson describes suffering as deprivation from food, movement, and light. But through deprivation, she builds the artistic power of her speakers. Dickinson craftily disguises her speakers' power by representing them as small, childlike, imprisoned, and starving:

It would have starved a Gnat--
To live so small as I--
And yet I was a living Child--
With Food's necessity

Upon me--like a Claw--
I could no more remove
Than I could coax a Leech away--
Or make a Dragon--move--

Nor like the Gnat--had I--
The privilege to fly
And seek a dinner for myself--
How mightier He--than I--

Nor like Himself--the Art
Upon the Window Pane
To gad my little Being out--
And not begin--again-- (#612)

The persona lacks any power or control over her life.
Dickinson represents her as small, weak, and dependent. Her condition and capabilities amount to less than the smallest creature, a gnat. She admires the gnat's "privilege to fly," to escape imprisonment, and most of all, to feed itself. The speaker in this poem, as the speakers in a series of Dickinson's "starving child" poems, must depend upon others for nourishment, and this dependence bothers her the most.

In other poems, Dickinson's starving speakers do not crave the literal food, but some other unnameable desire of which they feel deprived. One such speaker, when offered the banquet she thought she'd been wanting--"I had been hungry, all the Years--/ My Noon had Come--to dine--," feels sickened at the quantity and finds she isn't hungry: "The Plenty hurt me--'twas so new--/ Myself felt ill--and odd--/. . . Nor was I hungry" ($579). Mossberg proposes that Dickinson was "mother-hungry" and felt deprived of food because her family deprived her of the mother who provided food. Dickinson writes her starvation poems because she longed for a caring mother. Her refusal of food asserts her independence from parental nourishment that she has decided she will not receive anyway; it is her refusal rather than her lack of food that gives her the power to write: "words take on the function of food for Dickinson as a way to love and nourish herself." But maybe more than being deprived
of a domestic mother who kept physical nourishment from her, Dickinson felt deprived of a literary mother, of female precedents in literature who could nourish and substantiate her role as a poet. In the face of the literary world, she feels small, undernourished, and inadequate. Mossberg is right; Dickinson does compose poems out of this feeling of deprivation and punishment, but Dickinson both inflates and undermines her own sense of identity in the process.

For through deprivation, Dickinson's speakers realize the growth of the artist within. One speaker finds not food, but a quality within herself that sustains her:

Deprived of other Banquet,
I entertained Myself—
At first—a scant nutrition—
An insufficient Loaf—

But grown by slender addings
To so esteemed a size
'Tis sumptuous enough for me—
And almost to suffice

A Robin's famine able—
Red Pilgrim, He and I—
A Berry from our table
Reserve—for charity— (# 773)

Possibly here the speaker's "scant nutrition" or "insufficient Loaf" might refer to Dickinson's own growing canon of poetry. By her "slender addings" of new poems day by day, she eases the famine of her identity and realizes
herself as an artist. Dickinson here includes the Robin as a partaker of her feast, which can almost "suffice/ A Robin's famine." James Guthrie shows how Dickinson uses birds to create her own community of artists, whom she ranks according to the beauty of their song. The robin, he suggests, ideally represents Dickinson herself as artist for several reasons: the robin is indigenous to North America, its red breast "approximates the poet's auburn hair," and its "commonness contrasts with the richness of its song, a disparity Dickinson exploits in poems describing the transformation of commoners into royalty."

But Dickinson makes her robin masculine, as she does in most of her poems that concern robins. She uses the bird to represent the artist, but not the woman. Ellen Moers describes how although the women poets commonly use bird imagery, only male artists use the image of the nesting bird; women artists tend to avoid this image. The only time Dickinson writes of a mother robin and her nest, the robin is flying from an empty nest: "Quite empty, quite at rest,/ The Robin locks her Nest, and tries her Wings" (§1606). Instead of maternal confinement, the robin represents for Dickinson freedom, both physical and artistic.

Dickinson herself timidly asserts her own artistic freedom as she changes the meter of the ballad stanza from
eight syllables to seven syllables. This change does reflect the speaker's own timidity toward her growing artistry. It also allows meter to match the sense of the poem since the only line 7 rises to the fullness of eight syllables and emphasizes the sumptuousness of the phrase--"'Tis sumptuous enough for me." Interestingly, both Dickinson and Rossetti tend to drop syllables when changing metrical patterns, as if such changes would not offend or obtrude while still they would assert their ability to make poetic alterations to traditions.

Deprivation and pain create strength in Dickinson's poetic speakers. In "I can wade Grief--" her speaker admits: "Power is only Pain--/ Stranded, thro' Discipline,/ Till Weights--will hang--/ Give Balm--to Giants--/ And they'll wilt, like Men--" ($252). The power she speaks of becomes in other poems poetic power or the power to arrange words, as in "She dealt her pretty words like Blades--" ($479) or "My Life had stood--a Loaded Gun--" ($754).

In her own letters, Dickinson views the power of writing as an almost subversive act. In 1880, six years before her death, Dickinson writes to Louise Norcross:

What is it that instructs a hand lightly created, to impel shapes to eyes at a distance, which for them have the whole area of life or of death? Yet not a pencil in the street but has this awful power, though nobody arrests it. An earnest letter is or should be life-warrant or death-warrant, for what is each instant
but a gun, harmless because "unloaded," but that touched "goes off"? (L, #656)

Apparently, Dickinson felt safe in her anonymity. As her own poetic power remains undisturbed and unarrested through her reticence, she disguises her speakers' power with weakness. Or possibly she writes of pain and deprivation as a punishment for overstepping boundaries. For as Rossetti does, Dickinson creates physical walls and barriers for her personae.

In Rossetti's poetry walls and masks protect while they confine. This confinement guards against indulgences and resulting punishment. Often Rossetti's young women complain about "being locked up" for their protection, and they continually plot for their moments of escape. The protagonist of "The Iniquity of the Fathers Upon the Children" complains of her confinement when gentlemen visitors call:

My Lady seems to fear
Some downright dreadful evil,
And makes me keep my room
As closely as she can: . . .
In spite of all her care,
Sometimes to keep alive
I sometimes do contrive
To get out in the grounds
For a whiff of wholesome air,
Under the rose you know:
It's charming to break bounds,
Stolen waters are sweet, 
And what's the good of feet 
If for days they mustn't go? (p. 45)

But her Lady, her mother, rightly fears for her--the mother became pregnant out of wedlock while out "under the rose." The bounds the mother broke have caused her pain; she must lie about her daughter's identity or be shamed by the community for her actions. The speaker is forbidden more than just free access to the surrounding lands; she is forbidden free intercourse with her surrounding community.

For the isolation of protection breeds loneliness. The speaker in "A Royal Princess" (1861) thinks she "would rather be a peasant with her baby at her breast" than a confined princess. The princess possesses everything but freedom, and she thinks that the anonymity of the peasant life would relieve her loneliness:

Two and two my guards behind, two and two before,
Two and two on either hand, they guard me evermore;
Me, poor dove that must not coo--eagle that must not soar.

This poem is another of Rossetti's longer and less successful poems. Rossetti bases this poem on three line stanzas of fourteeners with triple rhymes. The racing rhythm of the fourteeners and the triple rhymes lend a comic
effect to a poem with a serious theme. She will vary the
meter of the heptameter lines, but she has already
established the racing, gay rhythm. But the poem does add
interest in a study of Rossetti's canon, particularly in the
previous quotation's images of the caged eagle and the
silenced dove. Rossetti, despite her endorsement of
marriage and conformity, uses bird imagery, just as
Dickinson does, to symbolize unjust imprisonment or physical
freedom rather than motherhood.

More often Rossetti creates internal barriers, and
self-imposed masks restrict her personae's actions or
desires. In "Dead Before Death" (1854), the speaker's mask
enforces protection but simultaneously freezes her vitality:
"Ah! changed and cold, how changed and very cold!/ With
stiffened smiling lips and cold calm eyes" (p. 313). This
persona's cold and barren attitude represents the attitude
of many of Rossetti's speakers. Sometimes, as in the poem
"Autumn" (1858), the walls, the restriction on sexuality,
and the resulting barrenness merge into the persona's
identity:

    My trees are not in flower,
    I have no bower,
    And gusty creaks my tower,
    And lonesome, very lonesome, is my strand. (p. 338)
Even in a playful poem, "Winter: My Secret" (1857), Rossetti envelops her speaker's identity in secrecy, and this persona hides within her own enclosure. The persona coyly teases an unnamed listener about some secret that she will not reveal. She conceals the secret within the fortress of herself:

I cannot ope to every one who taps,  
And let the draughts come whistling through my hall;  
Come bounding and surrounding me,  
Come buffeting, astounding me,  
Nipping and clipping through my wraps and all.  
I wear my mask for warmth.

Here the persona keeps out the cold with a mask of warmth and protection, whereas in other poems, such as "Dead Before Death," Rossetti's speakers keep out the warmth of passion with a chilling mask. But here also the mask acts as both protection and restriction from sexual indulgence. The imagery as well as the rhythm of bounding and surrounding, buffeting, astounding, nipping and clipping, intimates a sexual encounter. The persona imagines someday letting down her mask and releasing her secret and her passion "Perhaps some languid summer day,/ When . . . golden fruit is ripening to excess." Rossetti associates restriction with winter, coldness, and barrenness and naturalness with summer, warmth, and fertility.
These poems of punishment and restriction date between the years 1854 and 1865. But even some of Rossetti's religious verse of later years display this same sense of restriction and enclosure. "The Thread of Life" (1882), a poem of three sonnets, emphasizes in the sestet of the final sonnet the victory of Christ's resurrection. The middle sonnet, however, stresses the body's imprisonment in a world of flight and joyousness:

Thus am I mine own prison. Everything
   Around me free and sunny and at ease:
Or if in shadow, in a shade of trees
Which the sun kisses, where the gay birds sing.
And where all winds make various murmuring
   Where bees are found, with honey for the bees;
Where sounds are music, and where silences
Are music of an unlike fashioning.
Then gaze I at the merrymaking crew,
   And smile a moment and a moment sigh,
Thinking, Why can I not rejoice with you?
But soon I put the foolish fancy by:
I am not what I have nor what I do;
   But what I was I am, I am even I. (p. 262)

The persona feels stilted in her "prison" as she watches in the poem's octave the freedom and flight of the birds, wind, and bees. The sestet reconciles her desire to join the "merrymaking crew" as a "foolish fancy." The persona attempts to justify her imprisonment, but her language further entangles her dilemma: "But what I was I am, I am even I." The speaker wishes to assert her identity as
separate from the "merrymaking crew," but her repeated pronouns seem to cancel her self-assertions and her certainty (a phenomena common to both Dickinson and Rossetti that I discuss further in Chapter 4). Although the final stanza leads to an affirmation of heaven and death, the persona reveals in this stanza her sensation of earthly imprisonment and her desire for earthly freedom from restrictions.

Rossetti's religious verse frequently arises out of the struggles between earthly confinements and imagined transcendent freedom. Theo Dombrowski notices how Rossetti's themes work toward a longing for release: "Time and eternity, earthly misery and heavenly bliss intensify by antithesis the torment of a trapped soul longing for escape." The body becomes a prison not for a soul trapped in sinful flesh, but for a passion trapped in the restrictions put upon that flesh. In "I Will Lift up Mine Eyes Unto the Hills" (1856), Rossetti hopes for a release of that passion:

I am pale with sick desire,
For my heart is far away
From this world's fitful fire
And this world's waning day;
In a dream it overleaps
A world of tedious ills
To where the sunshine sleeps
On the everlasting hills.

Oh my soul, she beats her wings
And pants to fly away
Up to immortal things
In the heavenly day. (p. 182)

But the poem serves as a transfer of earthly passion into divine passion. The disdainful image of earthly passion, "this world's fitful fire," resembles the vision of glory in death, "where the sunshine sleeps/... In the heavenly day." She exchanges one type of warmth and passion—the world's fitful fire—for another type of life-energy—the sunshine of the heavenly day. Rossetti even matches her persona's image of disease for earth, "A world of tedious ills," with "a sick desire" for "immortal things." Rossetti imagines the difference between this world and the next in the freedom of movement in death, the flight of her soul. Just as she images her women personae as caged birds in secular poems, so she images the speaker's soul as a bird who desires the freedom of flight.

In Rossetti's poetry, walls and barriers protect against indulgences and desires that will bring punishment upon the woman who breaks those boundaries; she transfers desires for escape into a desire for the transcendent freedom of heaven. In Dickinson's poetry, barriers induce imaginative questing and a desire for immediate escape. In the following poem, the fence that surrounds the strawberries both restricts and
stimulates the speaker's desire to attain them:

Over the fence--
Strawberries--grow--
Over the fence--
I could climb--if I tried, I know--
Berries are nice!
But if I stained my Apron--
God would certainly scold!
Oh, dear,--I guess if He were a Boy--
He'd--climb--if He could! (#251)

Dickinson's choppy meter works for this poem. The short lines enact the speaker's breathless timidity and desire to commit a violation of boundaries, while the longer line, "I could climb--if I tried, I know," asserts her growing confidence. Dickinson also uses grammar to enact the speaker's oscillation between restriction and indulgence; the conditional tense throughout the poem--"I could...if," "But if...," "God would...," "if He were...," "if He could"--simultaneously expresses and represses movement. The assertion that "Berries are nice!" grows out of the speaker's doubt in her ability to attain those berries; the conditional of the fence, of her insecurity about crossing this barrier, creates her imaginative vision of the glories beyond. She perceives that her restraints are different and more severe than her male counterparts; if God were a boy, he could climb. (But then the conditional admits that even God as a boy might discover punishment for violation of
boundaries.) The poem warns not only the girl from "masculine" actions, but also the woman from sexual promiscuity. By partaking of forbidden fruit, she might stain her apron and just as the mother of the persona in Rossetti's "The Iniquity of the Fathers" become a social outcast for unpermitted sexual indulgence.

The confinement in Dickinson's verse also restricts sensation, particularly sight. In one of her definition poems, Dickinson defines doom as total confinement in a room without doors, windows, or escape:

Doom is the House without the Door--
'Tis entered from the Sun--
And then the Ladder's thrown away,
Because Escape--is done--

'Tis varied by the Dream
Of what they do outside--
Where Squirrels play--and Berries die--
And Hemlocks--bow--to God-- (#475)

The confinement deprives the speaker of nature, that is, of seeing nature—not only with just her eyes, but with her spirit. But the restriction of "doom" makes her appreciate and imaginatively participate in the forbidden. In the second stanza, she "dreams" into existence the nature she's been forbidden access to. Her imagined nature, however, exhumes an eerie bitterness, since the berries die and the hemlocks (pine trees or poisonous plants?) bow to God.
Enclosures and darkness provide safety. In "Before I got my eye put out" (§327), the persona is blind. She thinks how wonderful life would be if she could again see the sky, the meadows, the mountains, the forests, the birds, morning, and noon "to look at when I liked." But through describing what she can no longer see, she recreates and experiences nature's existence:

The Meadows—mine—
The Mountains—mine—
All Forest—Stintless Stars—
As much of Noon as I could take
Between my finite eyes—

The Motions of the Dipping Birds—
The Morning's Amber Road—
For mine—to look at when I liked—
The News would strike me dead—

So safer—guess—with just my soul
Upon the Window pane—
Where other Creatures put their eyes—
Incautious—of the Sun—

She guards herself against the noon and the sun, possibly the masculine presence that entraps her inside and in darkness. Confinement and blindness also act as safety measures, similar to Rossetti's masks and enclosures that protect against indulgences in the sun's burning warmth and fertility. Some of Dickinson's personae find safety in restriction and solace in imaginative questing beyond set
boundaries.

But other speakers find that restrictions and boundaries mean imprisonment. John Cody suggests that Dickinson's agoraphobia—the desire for walls, reassurance, love, and certainty—alternated with claustrophobia—inescapable walls; love transformed to limits. The safety of enclosure becomes the frustration of restriction:

I never hear the word "escape"
Without a quicker blood,
A sudden expectation,
A flying attitude!

I never hear of prisons broad
By. soldiers battered down,
But I tug childish at my bars
Only to fail again! (§77)

Dickinson writes in these prison poems as if her personae are prisoners of war, but they do not have any soldiers fighting to batter down their prison. Each woman must implement for herself her own form of escape. The actual walls and bars of the prison are metaphorical; often, as in Rossetti's poetry, Dickinson's speaker's prison is her body. In "What if I say I shall not wait!" (§277), the speaker postulates filing "this Mortal--off" to free herself from the prison of her body. Her freedom is again freedom from wartime imprisonment and torture: "They cannot take me--any more!/ Dungeons can call--and Guns implore/
Unmeaning--now--to me--." Mossberg believes this poem shows Dickinson at war with a society that will imprison women in their flesh: "She projects victory over society by killing herself, filing off the offended, offensive flesh." But, as in Rossetti's poetry, although death may provide hope for the future, the prospect of death offers no freedom for the living. And Dickinson, although her persona fails to escape her bars in "I never hear the word 'escape,'" writes of freedom for the living.

Unlike Rossetti, Dickinson writes of a mental freedom; despite the presence of the imprisoned body, the soul, through the mind, can fly:

No Rack can torture me--
My Soul--at Liberty--
Behind this mortal Bone
There knits a bolder One--

You cannot prick with saw--
Nor pierce with Scimitar--
Two Bodies--therefore be--
Bind One--The Other fly-- (#384)

Instead of separating her two "selves" or her two desires--one for enclosure and one for freedom--into two separate personae as Rossetti does, Dickinson here elaborates on her two bodies within one person. As Rossetti moves to integrate her opposing women in "Goblin Market" or "The Lowest Room," Dickinson retains her doubleness by not
reconciling them in the end. Thus her personae retain the semblance of bondage as well as the secrecy of freedom. In "They shut me up in Prose" (#613), the persona admits that even when they shut her in the closet "Because they liked me 'still,'" she actually whirled and flew in the freedom of her mind: "Still! Could themself have peeped--/ And seen my Brain--go round--/ They might as wise have lodged a Bird/ For Treason." For Dickinson, boundaries create imaginative questing. Whether the poetic speaker feels secure or imprisoned by restrictions, poetic visions free her from bondage.

But Dickinson finds freedom only in secrecy and Rossetti, only through a veil of discontent in her poetry. For both poets, darkness comes to represent female utterance, since both poets work through a film of secrecy and deception. In literary tradition, nighttime and the moon are feminine domains, while daytime and the sun are masculine. As I explained in Chapter two, Dickinson, especially, indicates a clear separation between the masculine domain of the day and the restricted feminine domain of the night. In her letter to Susan Gilbert, Dickinson describes how the daytime belongs to the man of noon who scorches and burns women who pine as the daisy does for a ray of his love. Dickinson's persona in "We grow
accustomed to the Dark—" explains how darkness can come to feel the normal way to exist, even though her nature does not incline toward darkness:

    Either the Darkness alters—
    Or something in the sight
    Adjusts itself to Midnight—
    And Life steps almost straight.  (#419)

Night becomes for Dickinson the time of her creativity—"Night's possibility!"—when the "man of noon" is absent and she has the freedom to sing or to weave her art. In her poetry, Dickinson describes two types of artists, the bird and the spider, who work at night. The spider "sewed at Night/ Without a Light/ Upon an Arc of White" (#1138). Gilbert and Gubar discuss how the spider, a spin/ster, becomes one ideal symbol of a craftswoman for Dickinson, since "female art must almost necessarily be secret art; mental pirouettes silently performed in the attic . . . . a spider's unobtrusively woven yarn of pearl." The spider also weaves herself into the protective covering of her art. Confinement and secrecy mean security. Dickinson's other night artist usually sings during the day, but Dickinson compares her persona to a robin who sings not just late in the season, but also late into the night. In "I shall keep singing!" (#250), other birds are leaving for "Yellower
Climes" when her persona takes her "place in summer." But she sings "a fuller tune" even though she sings after the others and in the night: "Vespers--are sweeter than Matins--Signor." The bird as artist represents the opposite to Dickinson's feelings of confinement. Instead of desiring the security of protection and remaining stationary in confinement, the bird sings publicly and flies freely. Both creatures define Dickinson's nighttime weaving and secret artistic flight.

Although Rossetti does not make such a clear connection between masculine and feminine and day and night, the darkness and the nocturnal world of ghosts appear frequently in her poetry. The persona in "Bird Raptures" (1876) looks forward eagerly to the evening for the appearance of the nightingale:

The sunrise wakes the lark to sing,  
The moonrise wakes the nightingale.  
Come darkness, moonrise, everything  
That is so silent, sweet, and pale,  
Come, so ye wake the nightingale. (p. 391)

The nightingale carries from Greek mythology the connotation of female suffering in song. In Greek mythology, Procne became a nightingale after she discovered that her husband Tereus had raped her sister Philomela and cut out Philomela's tongue so that she could not reveal the crime.
As punishment to her husband, Procne killed her own son, who resembled her husband, and fed him to Tereus. Procne's song as the nightingale carries the sorrow of this male persecution. Male writers of the nineteenth-century, particularly Keats and Arnold, use the nightingale in their poetry, but as a symbol that is separate from themselves. Keats in "Ode to a Nightingale" celebrates the nightingale's joy as the bird sings in a "melodious plot" away from "the weariness, the fever, and the fret" of this world. He sorrows in his separation from the joy of the nightingale's song-filled existence. Arnold in "Philomela" describes the "Eternal passion,/ Eternal pain" of the nightingale's song with the allusions to the Roman version of the myth that switches the roles of the sisters. By alluding to the myth, Arnold separates his speaker from direct participation with the nightingale's song.

Rossetti neither sorrows for the nightingale's world of which she'll never participate nor distances the nightingale's song through allusions to the myth. She merely longs for the nighttime so that she can participate in the nightingale's song of sweetness and sadness: "for a nightingale/ Floods us with sorrow and delight." The nightingale, then, symbolizes paradoxically the artist who can sing in silence, an important symbol for the female who feels persecuted and silenced by her culture. Rossetti's
persona anxiously awaits the night and the nightingale which will "Let silence set the world in tune." Just as the robin represents an appropriate symbol for Dickinson's artistry, so does the nightingale distinguish Rossetti's own artistic flight, as she sings in the face of female silence.

Gilbert and Gubar suggest that nineteenth-century female artists were searching for mothers who could guide them in their art, but found only silence. Rossetti writes several poems about ghosts, but "A Chilly Night" (1856) pertains particularly to this theme of darkness and the search for female voices. In this poem, the persona is searching in the "dead of night" for her mother's ghost; she finds the ghost, but she cannot hear her mother's words:

She opened her mouth and spoke;
I could not hear a word, . . .
I strained to catch her words,
   And she strained to make me hear;
But never a sound of words
   Fell on my straining ear. . . .
Living had failed and dead had failed,
   And I was indeed alone. (p. 322)

The words of the dead women are silent words, not captured in the permanency of print and unknowable to the living. Thus the nightingale who can bring the silence of night, woman's domain, into tune, into art, becomes a significant metaphor for Rossetti who feels alone and confined as a
female artist.

Dickinson, however, considered the Brontes, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and George Eliot—women artists whom she greatly admired—as important contemporaries if not precursors to her own writing. In her poem about Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Dickinson reveals her delight when she found another companion of the dark—one who could turn night into noon:

I think I was enchanted
When first a sombre Girl--
I read that Foreign Lady--
The Dark--felt beautiful--

And whether it was noon at night--
Or only Heaven--at Noon--
For very Lunacy of Light
I had not power to tell--  (#593)

The darkness no longer matters when she comes under the spell of another woman poet. The night becomes almost safe, normal, and sane: "'Twas a Divine Insanity--/ The Danger to be Sane." But the dangers of the night—despair, insanity, death, and silence—remain.

Although poetry becomes a vehicle for escape, their "illicit" involvement with this medium leaves both poets torn with doubts and guilt. Dickinson ranges beyond boundaries through poetry, but she acknowledges the existence of boundaries and punishment in her work.
Rossetti uses poetry to question only gently the roles and status of women. Her discontent is more subliminal; her disbelief in the system, less overt. Despite their differences, these women poets share images of restriction and punishment—especially in the metaphors of walls, masks, and physical deprivations—as well as images of hope and escape—particularly through the metaphors of birds with their freedom of movement and their expression in song. But their feelings of stealth concerning both their work and the covert messages within their poetry cause each poet great trauma.

Dickinson and Rossetti move from an identification in their poetry with darkness and silence (or those "artists" such as the nightingale or Elizabeth Barrett Browning who can break that silence) to an identification with death. The persona in Rossetti's poem "Rest" (p. 293) paradoxically describes the solace a woman receives in death: "Darkness more clear than noon-day holdeth her,/ Silence more musical than any song." The feeling of persecution and the struggle to resist or fight back with their poetry leaves these two women with a confusion of identity—a sensation of duplicity or split loyalties that makes them feel evil or insane. Many poems describe a relief in numbness, blankness, or emptiness like death, and several speakers in both women's poems desire to sleep and never awaken again to the tension.
Notes for Chapter 3

1 Erik Erikson, "Inner and Outer Space: Reflections on Womanhood," p. 20.


5 Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, III, p. 1380.


7 Barbara J. Williams, "A Room of Her Own: Emily Dickinson as Woman Artist," p. 87.


9 Barbara Antonina Clark Mossberg, Emily Dickinson: When a Writer is a Daughter, pp. 183, 182.


14 Mossberg, When a Writer is a Daughter, p. 142.

16 For examples of female robins, see poems #634 and #828.


18 See Adrienne Rich, "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson," 65 and Gilbert and Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic, p. 607 for astute explications of "My Life had stood--a Loaded Gun--" (#754). Rich discusses Dickinson's ambivalence toward power since aggression for a woman is "both the 'power to kill' and punishable by death." Gilbert and Gubar show how in this poem Dickinson becomes the speaker, the Master, and the Muse, since the gun symbolizes the poet.


20 John Cody, After Great Pain, p. 52.

21 Mossberg, When a Writer is a Daughter, p. 142.

22 Gilbert and Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic, p. 634.

23 See especially, Gilbert and Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic, pp. 93-104.
"Illocality": Metaphors of Absence

A nearness to Tremendousness--
An Agony procures--
Affliction ranges Boundlessness--
Vicinity to Laws

Contentment's quiet Suburb
Affliction cannot stay
In Acres--Its Location
Is Illocality--
---Emily Dickinson, #963

It's a weary life, it is, she said:--
Doubly blank in a woman's lot:
I wish and I wish I were a man:
Or, better than any being, were not:

Were nothing at all in all the world,
Not a body and not a soul:
Not so much as a grain of dust
Or drop of water from pole to pole.
---Christina Rossetti, "From the Antique"

Dickinson and Rossetti often reveal anxiety about loss
in their poems--loss of place, sexuality, and integrated
identity. These poems create ephemeral or unfocused images
because of their authors' attempts to express an
inexpressible feeling of loss. Through masks,
fragmentation, and simulation, reality in these poems
dissipates into an existential plain. Most metaphors, with
the exception of winter's images of freezing and barrenness,
become inappropriate to describe this existential
non-reality. Instead, both women resort to negative metaphors describe the world and multiple personalitites to describe the self. Their poems' speakers reveal fragmentation in life and a desire for the comfort of non-existence in death.

Psychic fragmentation characterizes Rossetti's poetry when she describes the tension of choosing either this world's pleasures or heaven's rewards. Dombrowski also notices this fragmentation in Rossetti's writing: "In a sense, all of her poetry is an attempt to use words to overcome the fundamental bifurcations that distressed her life and so deeply characterized her sensibility."¹ In Time Flies, Rossetti's diary for a Christian's daily edification, she illustrates her poetic characters' fragmentation in an allegory of a spider and his shadow:

They jerked, zigzagged, advanced, retreated, he and his shadow posturing in ungainly indissoluble harmony. He seemed exasperated, fascinated, desperately endeavouring and utterly helpless.

What could it all mean? One meaning and one only suggested itself. That spider saw without recognising his black double, and was mad to disengage himself from the horrible pursuing inalienable presence. . . .

To me this self-haunted spider appears a figure of each obstinate impenitent sinner, who having outlived enjoyment remains isolated irretrievably with his own horrible loathsome self.²

Rossetti uses the spider and his shadow to illustrate the
"impatient sinner" and his "loathsome self," but the imagery also represents her own situation as a single woman artist who feels herself split between society's expectations and her own needs and wants. Across the ages, from the Greek myth of Philomela who weaves the story of her rape to Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott" who weaves in silent isolation the world's reflections, the spider who weaves in silence and in isolation represents the literary tradition of the woman artist. Rossetti, however, associates the spider/artist or woman/artist with feelings of duplicity and sinfulness.

In addition to the spider's web representing a woman's art, the spider's cobwebs also connote disuse and decay within a woman herself. While illustrating how Dickinson uses spider imagery, Gilbert and Gubar explain the myth of virgin women and spiders, that is, how "virgins of long standing, free from male attachments, . . . have often been seen as empty vessels (or chasms) filled with disquieting shadows." From disuse, the womb becomes peopled with spiders and cobwebs. They then quote Simone de Beauvoir's summary of this myth, which warrants repetition here for its appropriateness to Rossetti's vision of the spider:

... virginity has...erotic attraction only if it is in alliance with youth; otherwise its mystery again becomes disturbing. Many men of today feel a sexual repugnance in the presence of maidenhood too prolonged; and it is
not only psychological causes that are supposed to make "old maids" mean and embittered females. The curse is in their flesh itself, that flesh which is object for no subject, which no man's desire has made desirable, which has bloomed and faded without finding a place in the world of men; turned from its proper destination, it becomes an oddity, as disturbing as the incommunicable thought of a madman. Speaking of a woman of forty, still beautiful, but presumably virgin, I have heard a man say coarsely: "It must be full of spiderwebs inside." And, in truth, cellars and attics, no longer entered, of no use, become full of unseemly mystery; phantoms will likely haunt them; abandoned by people, houses become the abode of spirits. Unless feminine virginity had been dedicated to a god, one easily believes that it implies some kind of marriage with the demon. Virgins unsubdued by man, old women who have escaped his power, are more easily than others regarded as sorceresses; for the lot of women being bondage to another, if she escapes the yoke of man she is ready to accept that of the devil.

The old maid or "spinster," in addition to having a womb filled with cobwebs and spiders, takes on the associations of a spider weaving a web or trap for an unsuspecting "marriageable" victim. Rossetti, however, both in the spider passage from Time Flies and in other poetic images of duplicity, fears more the implications of yoking with the devil than those of failing to trap a man.

The women that Rossetti creates find themselves and the vessels within them as loathsome as the spider finds his shadow. Rossetti seems unconsciously affected by this myth of virginity too prolonged becoming evil and cursed flesh. Her poetic speakers fear bondage with the devil because of their flesh, even though few speakers, other than her unwed
mothers, reveal specific sins to justify these fears. Instead, flesh becomes a curse to these women, not from sexual overuse but from sexual disuse. Her speakers express a frantic urgency to bind themselves to God so that they will not appear yoked with the devil. In "Who Shall Deliver Me?" (March, 1864), the speaker prays to God to give her strength to "bear" herself:

All others are outside myself;  
I lock my door and bar them out,  
The turmoil, tedium, gad-about.

I lock my door upon myself,  
And bar them out; but who shall wall  
Self from myself, most loathed of all? ... 

Myself, arch-traitor to myself;  
My hollowest friend, my deadliest foe,  
My clog whatever road I go.

Yet One there is can curb myself,  
Can roll the strangling load from me,  
Break off the yoke and set me free. (p. 238)

The technique of mirroring pronouns—"Self from myself," "Myself, arch-traitor to myself"—Rossetti also uses in another Christian prose work, The Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse. "Who I was I am," she writes, "who I am I am, who I am I must be for ever and ever. . . . I may loathe myself or be amazed at myself, but I cannot unself myself for ever and ever."

These mirroring pronouns work paradoxically in two ways.
In one way, the pronouns cancel themselves, just as repeated images in a mirror cause the onlooker to question which presence reflects reality. "Myself" and the "arch-traitor to myself" are at the same time equal and self-cancelling: the speaker's double self cancels her integrated identity and leaves her troubled and warring with fragmentation. In a second way, however, the multiple identities allow Rossetti an escape from a confined and restricted self. The "arch-traitor" that she wishes to banish may be the black double or the shadow, but this double is also the creative, artistic element. She may experience a loss of an untroubled, solid self, but she gains her creative impetus through multiplicity.

As well as retaining no single self, the speaker also retains no conventional place. She has kept out intruders to her body, locked the door upon the house of her body, and kept her space inviolate. But then she has locked herself in with her double, that black, loathsome creature that has become her enemy and foe. She locates this black self, her "hollowest friend" within her interior, within the emptiness of the untouched and unproducing womb. Like the empty house full of cobwebs, phantoms, and mystery, she fears the emptiness of her own self which frighteningly transforms into an evil spirit. She presumes her salvation comes from God, but she still fears a union with this devilish creature
within. She feels God does exist and can set her free, but he remains silent. Even her interior "house" no longer belongs to her. But then paradoxically from this interior tension she creates poetry.

In other poems, the spider's black double becomes a goblin. In Rossetti's sonnet "The World" (1854), a medusa-like creature tries to seduce the persona into becoming like herself:

By day she woos me, soft, exceeding fair:
    But all night as the moon so changeth she;
Loathsome and foul with hideous leprosy,
    And subtle serpents gliding in her hair.
By day she woos me to the outer air,
    Ripe fruits, sweet flowers, and full satiety:
But thro' the night a beast she grins at me,
    A very monster void of love and prayer.
By day she stands a lie: by night she stands
    In all the naked horror of the truth,
    With pushing horns and clawed and clutching hands.
Is this a friend indeed, that I should sell
    My soul to her, give her my life and youth,
Till my feet, cloven too, take hold on hell? (p. 182)

In this sonnet, Rossetti varies the iambic meter adroitly. The trochee in line 2 heightens the length of the speaker's struggle with this dark creature, "all night," just as the initial trochee of line 3 "Loathsome and foul" emphasizes the suddenness of the goblin's change from fairness to hideousness. The two initial spondees in line 6 reveal the attraction that the goblin holds for the speaker as the
speaker lingers over the sensual delights of "Ripe fruits, sweet flowers." These forbidden fruits remind us of Laura's similar indulgences, both of sexuality and of self-assertion, in "Goblin Market." The image of this creature at night, "With pushing horns and clawed and clutching hands," further strengthens how the creature works on the speaker's sexual desires. Rossetti's goblin participates in the same biblical tradition as Spenser's Duessa, a demon who, disguised as a beautiful woman, leads the righteous astray. The difference between Rossetti's "demon" and Spenser's Duessa lies in her relationship with the female persona; Rossetti's demon persuades as the speaker's "friend" rather than her lover. Instead of enticing her to sin with sexual advances, the demon represents sexuality and entices the speaker to become wantonly "demon-like." Rossetti's speaker fears not just that she may succumb to the demon's attractions, but that by realizing the demon's advantages over her own, the speaker might become her black double: "Till my feet, cloven too, take hold on hell."

But despite her fears, Rossetti seems fascinated by this mythical Medusa, "with subtle serpents gliding in her hair," who has the power to transform men into stone. Rossetti remakes the image in the sonnet "Babylon the Great" (1893):
Foul is she and ill-favoured, set askew:
    Gaze not upon her till thou dream her fair,
    Lest she should mesh thee in her wanton hair
Adept in arts grown old yet ever new.
Her heart lusts not for love, but thro' and thro'
    For blood, as spotted panther lusts in lair;
No wine is in her cup but filth is there
Unutterable with plagues hid out of view.
Gaze not upon her for her dancing whirl
    Turns giddy the fixed gazer presently:
Gaze not upon her, lest thou be as she
When, at the far end of her long desire,
Her scarlet vest and gold and gem and pearl
    And she amid her pomp are set on fire.  (p. 284)

Like the goblin in "The World," this woman/demon heads for disaster and willingly seduces others to the same hell-fire. Rossetti emphasizes with the initial trochee how "foul" the demon is. In this poem, however, Rossetti does not use spondees to reveal the power of the demon's attractions, "Ripe fruits, sweet flowers"; instead, the initial spondees warn the speaker about the gravity of looking at those attractions. Rossetti begins lines 2, 9, and 11 with the forceful "Gaze not upon her." This creature also represents sexual attraction, since she will "mesh thee in her wanton hair," and hair symbolizes for the Victorians a woman's sexual power. As well as seducing the persona toward sexual pleasures, the goblin also entices the potential sinner toward material pleasures, since this creature wears riches on her body: "Her scarlet vest and gold and gem and pearl." But however foul, both of these goblin women have
power: power of movement and power of transformation—of themselves as well as of others. Dolores Rosenblum points out how differently these loathsome women can behave compared to the women in other Rossetti poems whom men restrict and confine or even freeze and transfix into art.

For instance in her poem "In an Artist's Studio" (1856), Rossetti depicts the "death" of a woman model painted by a male artist (William Michael Rossetti indicates in his note on the poem that the model is Elizabeth Siddal and the artist, Dante Gabriel Rossetti). The artist "feeds upon her face by day and night" until the artist kills and transfixes the woman onto the canvas, "Not as she is, but as she fills his dream" (p. 330). She no longer remains herself; she becomes only an image of the male artist's imagination. This woman, who acts only as the model and not as the artist, submits without power or motion while the male painter fixes her into a lie.

These two demon/women, on the contrary, hold the power of movement and transformation. They act as artists, the movers of the imagination, who can turn men into stone or themselves into beautiful creatures or hideous apparitions. These women can transfix others while they themselves remain in frenzied motion. They possess the key to nature's delights and to the riches of the world. Rossetti as an artist seems fascinated with this figure, but at the same
time the demon/woman horrifies her. This demon figure, just as the spider's black double, remains a part of herself that she cannot forsake, "self from myself," "I cannot unself myself." The demon attracts her both to the world's indulges of sex and wealth and to sensual, artistic renditions of the world, but her Christian sensibilities toward ascetic subservience and humility stigmatize either assertion, whether sexual or literary, as pride and sin. Thus symbols of the woman artist, the spider and the medusa/duessa, become in Rossetti's work symbols of our dark and sinful selves. The artistic self fragments loathsomely from the Christian self.

Dickinson does not couch her fragmentation within the confines of Christianity as Rossetti does, but Dickinson reveals her divided consciousness as Rossetti reveals hers through mirroring pronouns and images of goblins as black doubles. Dickinson locates a black double within the interior self as Rossetti does, and since the virginal womb resembles an abandoned cellar filled with mystery and cobwebs, Dickinson finds the self "haunted." In "One need not be a Chamber--to be Haunted--" (§670), Dickinson discovers more frightening presences within the self than in external reality. Dickinson also uses multiple and self-cancelling (or self-creating) pronouns to describe the duplicity within: "Ourself behind ourself, concealed--/
Should startle most." The interior intruder "startles most" because this foe is inseparable from the self and dangerous to the self's integrated identity, but productive to the self's creativity.

As in Rossetti's use of these pronouns, the multiplication of references reduces the certainty of the individual's untroubled reality, but multiplies the avenues of creative escape. Nevertheless, just as Dickinson's poetic speakers take arms against a world that imprisons them, so do her poetic speakers declare war on this foe within them. Dickinson wrote the major portion of her poetry during the American Civil War, and the image of a nation divided against itself--often with families divided and fighting on two sides of the war--becomes an applicable image for her own divided sensibilities. The interior war requires greater bravery than the exterior war, because of the loneliness of the battle: "To fight aloud, is very brave--/ But gallanter, I know/ Who charge within the bosom/ The Cavalry of Woe--" (#159), and because of the futility of victory:

Me from Myself--to banish--
Had I Art--
Impregnable my Fortress
Unto All Heart--

But since Myself--assault Me--
How have I peace
Except by subjugating
Consciousness?
And since We're mutual Monarch
How this be
Except by Abdication
Me--of Me?  (§642)

The speaker cannot conquer this assaulting self since they are "mutual Monarch"; her only peace comes through surrendering or abdicating her right to rule to her other self. Dickinson suggests the impossibility of any such relief, however, in her grammatical structuring of pronouns—"Me from Myself," "Myself--assault Me," "Me--of Me." The mirroring pronouns enforce the equality of the divided selves, while at the same time they cancel the superiority of either. In addition to the pronouns mirroring the conflict, the poem's meter reflects the erratic struggle within the speaker. Dickinson retains the semblance of the ballad stanza which contains four lines that alter between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. But except for lines 4 and 6 which have four syllables, Dickinson alters her lines with odd numbers of syllables, first seven syllables and then three. The effect jolts the reader who expects the regularity of even syllables. The subsequent irregular rhythm jars the reader into a similar confusion that the speaker, who cannot ascertain her real identity, must feel.
Dickinson also imagines as Rossetti does that the personality fragments into good and evil personae. Dickinson's evil persona resembles Rossetti's goblin images. In "The Soul has Bandaged moments," the evil persona, the goblin, retains the good persona, the soul, as a prisoner of war:

The Soul has Bandaged moments--
When too appalled to stir--
She feels some ghastly Fright come up
And stop to look at her--

Salute her—with long fingers—
Caress her freezing hair—
Sip, Goblin, from the very lips
The Lover—hovered—o'er—
Unworthy, that a thought so mean
Accost a Theme—so—fair—

The soul has moments of Escape—
When bursting all the doors—
She dances like a Bomb, abroad,
And swings upon the Hours,

As do the Bee—delirious borne—
Long Dungeoned from his Rose—
Touch Liberty—then know no more,
But Noon, and Paradise—

The Soul's retaken moments—
When, Felon led along,
With shackles on the plumed feet,
And staples, in the Song,

The Horror welcomes her, again,
These, are not brayed of Tongue— ($512)

Dickinson's goblin is not a harlot, but she does caress the soul's hair ("freezing" hair from the fright of the
experience) and sip at the lips "The Lover--hovered--o'er."
But this goblin is not trying to lead the soul into any kind
of indulgences, sexual or otherwise; Dickinson's fiend
functions differently from Rossetti's. While Rossetti's
demon enticed the speaker to "Ripe fruits, sweet flowers,
and full satiety," Dickinson's keeps her persona from
indulging as the bee does in the liberty of "Noon, and
Paradise" and restricts her artistic impulse "With shackles
on the plumed feet,/ And staples, in the Song." Although
Dickinson's goblin does not represent artistic
transformations as Rossetti's does, Dickinson's restricting
goblin entices the soul to escape and to perform with
creative self-assertion: "She dances like a Bomb." The
creativity derived from multiplicity, however, portends
destruction for Dickinson, both for the self and for others,
since this creativity manifests in the image of a "Bomb."
But however differently each poet describes the goblin's
role in the self's fragmentation (for Rossetti, as the
creative element and for Dickinson, as the element that
restricts creativity), both women define fragmentation as a
struggle between indulgence and restriction, between
artistic mobility and confined immobility.

In many poems, Dickinson's personae lose the battle
with the warring double. The persona will question her
identity and her sanity: "And Something's odd--within--/
That person that I was—/ And this One—do not feel the same—/ Could it be Madness—this?" (§410). Sometimes the tone in these poems describing the pain of fragmentation seems lighthearted, mocking. But often this incongruity between the poem's subject and the tone results from the inappropriateness of the poem's metaphors for the theme. For instance, in "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," the spirits who haunt the speaker win the struggle for the self's domination and hold a funeral for her dead self:

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,  
And Mourners to and fro  
Kept treading--treading--till it seemed  
That Sense was breaking through--

And when they all were seated,  
A Service, like a Drum--  
Kept beating--beating--till I thought  
My Mind was going numb--

And then I heard them lift a Box  
And creak across my Soul  
With those same Boots of Lead, again,  
Then Space--began to toll,  

As all the Heaven were a Bell,  
And Being, but an Ear,  
And I, and Silence, some strange Race  
Wrecked, solitary, here--

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,  
And I dropped down, and down--  
And hit a World, at every plunge,  
And Finished knowing--then--  

The humor of mourners inside of her holding a service and
creaking across her soul with the coffin clashes with the horror of the situation. She tries to describe this deadness within with metaphors for external death. In external reality, a funeral accompanies a death. A funeral for internal death, however, seems disjunctive. Dickinson portrays the strangeness of the persona's situation with paradox: the funeral is for the speaker, but she feels and hears the mourners.

In fact, the entire poem pulsates with the treading of the mourners, the beating of their service drums, the creaking of the pall bearers' "Boots of Lead," and the tolling of space like the tolling of the church bells after the service. It is as though the pulsation of her life through her heartbeat becomes the sound of her funeral for her internal death. Even the meter regulates the pulsation since only line 5 with seven syllables fluctuates from the regularity of the alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter.

But for all this orchestration of pulsating sound, she is alone and wrecked in silence. Dickinson deftly varies the iambic meter with an initial spondee to express the / / violence of the desolation: "Wrecked, solitary, here." The metaphors for external reality become meaningless to describe her internal anguish, and she feels herself falling through the chasm created by her internal division, a chasm
not unlike the split Dickinson describes in her persona's mind in "This Chasm, Sweet, upon my life" (#858). The drop, however, into the chasm, made longer by Dickinson's use of \( \sim / \) / \( \sim / \) the spondaic foot—"And I dropped down, and down," brings knowledge, maybe an ability to cope with fragmentation.

The inability of inadequate metaphors to express or represent paradoxically a sensation that neither poet can explain leads both women to negative expressions when they describe the effects of fragmentation upon consciousness. In poems that represent identity, the poets begin to describe by negatives, to explain who their personae are or how these personae feel by explaining who they are not or what they do not feel. Dickinson and Rossetti replace the rich, detailed images in the poems on nature and love with images of space, blankness, and emptiness in poems concerning identity crises. Rossetti's "From the Antique" (1854) attributes such crises to womanhood:

It's a weary life, it is, she said:--
Doubly blank in a woman's lot:  
I wish and I wish I were a man:  
Or, better than any being, were not:

Were nothing at all in all the world,  
Not a body and not a soul:  
Not so much as a grain of dust  
Or drop of water from pole to pole. (p. 312)

The persona describes her self-weariness with an expression
of emptiness, "Doubly blank." She imagines that life as a man may improve her life, but her double emphasis, "I wish and I wish I were a man," actually negates her desire through over emphasis. She actually wishes to negate her being out of existence, to become "nothing at all in all the world."

Sometimes Rossetti describes the external world through the outlook of internal emptiness. Even her religious poems can describe a world of existential reality. Rossetti's metaphors for life in "Days of Vanity" (1873) dissolve into nothingness:

A Dream that waketh,
Bubble that breaketh,
Song whose burden sigheth,
A passing breath,
Smoke that vanisheth,--
Such is life that dieth. . . .

A scent exhaling,
Snow water failing,
Morning dew that drieth,
A windy blast,
Lengthening shadows cast,
Such is life that dieth.

Rossetti uses the Biblical images from the Old Testament that express the insignificance of man's life: "For who knoweth what is good for man in this life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow"; and from the New Testament: "For what is your life? It is even a vapor,
that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away." Although she draws from biblical images of life's brevity and vanity, Rossetti conspicuously omits in this poem the biblical hope of salvation. Most of the images in Rossetti's metaphors are so insubstantial that their original existences are questionable: dreams, bubbles, breath, smoke, scents, wind, and shadows. She compares life to qualities that are impossible to capture or keep. Insecurity of self affects the security of place; existence becomes existential.

Dickinson also questions the self's identity and place. Rather than wishing for extinction and nothingness, Dickinson's personae describe how just such an internal death occurs under the agony of great pain: "After great pain, a formal feeling comes--/ The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs--" (#341). Life continues externally only through simulation and trickery:

I breathed enough to take the Trick--
And now, removed from Air--
I simulate the Breath, so well--
That One, to be quite sure--

The Lungs are stirless--must descend
Among the Cunning Cells--
And touch the Pantomime--Himself,
How numb, the Bellows feels! (#272)

The speaker tries to indicate that she has died: "The Lungs
are stirless." She only appears to be alive through a type of simulation or pantomime that she can successfully imitate because she did breathe naturally for so long. She protects herself from suffocation by trickery and deception; other people cannot recognize the true numbness within.

The need for trickery recurs in the poetry of both women; their personae mask their true feelings, whether these feelings stem from violence or deadness, creativity or blankness. The necessity to mask internal abnormality with external quotidian tasks multiplies the speakers' psychic fragmentation. In the following poem, Dickinson uses domesticity to mask not only her persona's internal deadness, but also her potential for explosion:

I tie my Hat--I crease my Shawl--
Life's little duties do--precisely--
As the very least
Were infinite--to me--

I put new Blossoms in the Glass--
And throw the old--away--
I push a petal from my Gown
That anchored there--I weigh
The time 'twill be till six o'clock
I have so much to do--
And yet--Existence--some way back--
Stopped--struck--my ticking--through--
We cannot put Ourself away
As a completed Man
Or Woman--When the Errand's done
We came to Flesh--upon
There may be--Miles on Miles of Nought--
Of Action--sicker far--
To simulate--is stinging work--
To cover what we are
From Science--and from Surgery--
Too Telesopic Eyes
To bear on us unshaded--
For their--sake--not for Ours--
'Twould start them--
We--could tremble--
But since we got a Bomb--
And held it in our Bosom--
Nay--Hold it--it is calm--

Therefore--we do life's labor--
Though life's Reward--be done--
With scrupulous exactness--
To hold our Senses--on-- (#443)

Again, Dickinson uses erratic meter to reveal the instability of her speaker. The poem consists of eight ballad stanzas, even though only stanzas 2, 3, 4, and 5 have the regular iambic tetrameter alternating with iambic trimeter. In these regular stanzas, the speaker has distanced herself from her emotions and both describes her precise performance of "Life's little duties" and philosophizes about the necessity of simulating "what we are." When the speaker returns to describing her internal self, the iambic tetrameter lines lose a syllable. The irregularity of seven odd syllables juxtaposed with the regularity of six even syllables in the remaining three stanzas, mirrors the speaker's own seesawing of emotions from inward instability to outward precise simulation of life's duties. Even Dickinson's collapsing of six stanzas into one long stanza heightens the speaker's potential explosiveness. The opening and closing stanzas relay the
speaker's controlled preciseness and exactness in outward duties. The collapsing together of the six interior stanzas enacts a hurried rambling movement that moves from the control of "I put new Blossoms in the Glass" to the hysteria of "'Twould start them--/ We--could tremble--/ But since we got a Bomb."

The speaker continues life externally as if these "little duties" were "infinite" or greatly meaningful to her. But she sarcastically refers to the meaningfulness of her duties, for she describes herself as doing only the menial tasks of arranging her appearance and arranging the flowers. With so little stimulation in "so much to do," no wonder her interior self, her existence, has stopped; Dickinson emphasizes the violence of this cessation with an initial spondee--"And yet--Existence--some way back--/

Stopped--struck--my ticking--through." The speaker continues the simulation of life, the performance of little duties, because although this is "stinging work," she feels she must protect others who have telescopic and probing eyes from the truth about herself--"For their--sake--not for Ours--." For she has replaced the ticking of her heart in her bosom with a bomb. She has replaced her nurturing femininity with potentially destructive masculinity--an explosive potential capable not only of creativity but also
of the destruction of the self and others. Recall the soul in "The Soul has bandaged moments" who escapes confinement and "dances like a Bomb." For the speakers of both poems, the bomb seems the only recourse for escaping menial existence and confinement. Possibly Dickinson saw herself in the roles of her poetic speakers and envisioned the bomb as her poetry. Instead of protecting and nurturing the growth of a family, she may have felt she was secretly destroying with a warlike ferocity the conventional mores of a woman's place in society. In her own guilt, she sees her poetry as destructive weapons, as for instance in "She dealt her pretty words like blades" (#479), "Infection in the sentence breeds" (#1261), and "My Life had stood--a Loaded Gun" (#754). Recall also the letter that Dickinson wrote to Louise Norcross in 1880 that I mentioned in Chapter 3. In this letter, Dickinson discusses the "awful power" of the pencil that similar to the gun remains "harmless because 'unloaded,' but that touched 'goes off.'" By keeping her poetry secret, Dickinson herself simulates outward duties and hides her "bomb." In this way, others cannot put out her "death-warrant" for her "awful power," but her own conflicting feelings seem to clamp a death warrant upon her interior self.

Rossetti also expresses the need for speakers to hide an interior death from external notice. In "Dead Before Death"
(1854), the speaker feels utterly changed internally, but she keeps on her external mask of the pleasant female: "Ah changed and cold, how changed and very cold,/ With stiffened smiling lips and cold calm eyes!" Just as Dickinson's speaker's domestic activities keep prying eyes away from her true identity, so Rossetti's speaker's smiling face and calm eyes mask the reality of this pleasant woman's internal death and her anguish over this death. Rossetti's speaker feels cold, hard, and rigid, not as Dickinson's because of the presence of a potentially destructive ability, but because of the absence of fruitful productivity within: "All fallen the blossom that no fruitage bore,/ All lost the present and the future time,/ All lost, all lost, the lapse that went before:/ So lost till death shut-to the opened door." The speaker's barrenness causes the death of her femininity, and her mask keeps up the facade to cover her emptiness.

But the personae in several poems don't concern themselves with masking reality for others' benefit; Dickinson and Rossetti try in these poems to grapple with and explain existential emptiness. As in the following poem by Dickinson, they discover that they can not pin down this deadness with explicit metaphors:

It was not Death, for I stood up,  
And all the Dead, lie down--
It was not Night, for all the Bells
Put out their Tongues, for Noon.

It was not Frost, for on my Flesh
I felt Siroccos—crawl—
Nor Fire—for just my Marble feet
Could keep a Chancel, cool—

And yet, it tasted, like them all,
The Figures I have seen
Set orderly, for Burial,
Reminded me, of mine—

As if my life were shaven,
And fitted to a frame,
And could not breathe without a key,
And 'twas like Midnight, some—

When everything that ticked—has stopped—
And Space stares all around—
Or Grisly frosts—first Autumn morns,
Repeal the Beating Ground—

But, most, like Chaos—Stopless—cool—
Without a Chance, or Spar—
Or even a Report of Land—
To justify—Despair.   (#510)

Dickinson reveals her inability even to express the reality of this poem's experience in the poem's first word, "it."
She cannot label "it" with any term that describes this reality. Only by negation can Dickinson's speaker define what is known. The speaker tries to derive knowledge by canceling out what the experience is not. In the first four stanzas, the speaker describes the experience, or what the experience was not, in the past tense. She was standing, unlike the dead; she heard the noon bells, not known to night; she felt hot, oppressive winds on her flesh, not
possible with frost; her feet were cold, like marble, not likely during a fire. Yet her state "tasted" like death, night, frost, and fire. The poem's exact metrical form for the ballad enacts the speaker's desire to understand as she carefully retraces her feelings during the experience. Only Dickinson's slant rhymes, "down/ noon"; "crawl/ cool"; "seen/ mine"; "frame/ some," reveal how the form mirrors the speaker's own uneasiness.

The final two stanzas change from past tense to present tense. The change in tense reflects the change in poetic strategy from describing what "it" was not to explaining how "it" "'twas like Midnight, some." The last two stanzas attempt to locate the existential feeling in time. But the experience exists outside time just as the speaker's "existence" in "I tie my Hat---I crease my Shawl" (#443) has "Stopped--struck--my ticking--through." In this experience, "everything that ticked--has stopped," and Dickinson expands the sensation of this timelessness with a medial spondee--"And Space stares all around." That this experience exists outside time makes "it" more terrifying, as Sharon Cameron explains:

The power of these negations is revealed in how firmly they stake out the territory of the known until all that is left is the vague and terrifying inference that this state is worse than physical death because, having most of its attributes, it is denied any of its reliefs: outside of time, it does not end.
The final stanza derives a metaphor for "it"—"But, most, like Chaos—Stopless—cool," but then adds the negation, "Without a Chance, or Spar—/ Or even a Report of Land." Surprisingly, because Dickinson rarely uses the period, this poem ends with a period. But rather than bringing an end to the chaos and despair of the poem, the period, in the same way as the present tense in the final stanzas, reveals the enduring quality of the existential state for the speaker. Although we cannot know the incidents that gave Dickinson the insight into such anguish, we can see how she transforms this pain into poetry. Suzanne Juhasz comments that "although she may not be able to control its causes—those events in the external world which produce crisis—she can in this way take control of the activity in her own mind, utilizing its very danger and pain to arrive at insight."

In a similar poem of despair, "Cobwebs" (1855), Rossetti uses negation as Dickinson does to describe internal death. Rossetti's poem is more eerie than Dickinson's existential experience, because Rossetti describes only a landscape void of any sensation or any human to experience the emptiness:

It is a land with neither night nor day, Nor heat nor cold, nor any wind nor rain, Nor hills nor valleys: but one even plain
Stretches through long unbroken miles away,
While through the sluggish air a twilight grey
Broodeth: no moons or seasons wax and wane,
No ebb and flow are there along the main,
No bud-time, no leaf-falling, there for aye:--
No ripple on the sea, no shifting sand,
No beat of wings to stir the stagnant space:
No pulse of life through all the loveless land
And loveless sea; no trace of days before,
No guarded home, no toil-won resting-place,
No future hope, no fear for evermore. (pp. 317-318)

Rossetti's "Cobwebs" begins as Dickinson's "It was not
death" with the indefinite word "it." Rossetti adds more
description when she explains that "it is a land," but then
the remainder of the poem distances the land from any normal
occurrences of light, seasons, time, or life. Rossetti
carefully builds this sonnet with a perfect rhyme scheme and
meter, but she adds no resolution in the sestet to the
problem in the octave. Rossetti separates the sestet from
the octave by a dash after the eighth line, and by a change
in the rhyme from "abbaabba" to "cdcede." But she does not
offer in the sestet any solution, easing of emotion, or
releasing of pressure accumulated in the octave. She
continues with the same bleak negation in the sestet that
describes only a stagnant space of twilight grey. Her use
of the sonnet form undercuts itself and offers the same
sense of Dickinson's lines, "Without a Chance, or Spar--/
Or even a Report of Land--/ To justify--Despair." The sonnet
typically conveys closure and solution, but Rossetti's use
of the ordered form without the traditional closure reveals the situation as beyond hopelessness; there exists no solution or ease or release. Just as Dickinson heightens the length of timelessness with the medial spondee in "And / / / / space stares all around," so Rossetti reveals the unending length of this land with the initial trochees in lines 4 and 6--"Stretches" and "Broodeth."

Ralph Bellas compares this poem to other wasteland poems such as Robert Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," and says that "Cobwebs" is "an early Victorian example of the kind of despair poem that became fairly common in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century." But unlike Browning's poem, no quester or any type of life struggles to survive in Rossetti's wasteland. Rossetti's wasteland stands out uniquely in its absolute barrenness. In other of Rossetti's poems, such as "May" or "From Sunset to Rise Star," personae perceive an exterior wasteland from interior barrenness or grief. This poem, "Cobwebs," could be an interior wasteland projected onto an exterior landscape. The title, "Cobwebs," recalls the myth of the invasion of cobwebs and spiders into the virgin woman's womb that has been closed off from human contact for too many years. The lack of normal natural phenomena—no night or day, wind or rain, moons or seasons—indicates an interior environment, but this environment is diseased,
"sluggish air" and "stagnant space," and can maintain "no pulse of life." As in other poems, Rossetti projects her childlessness onto a barren and fruitless landscape. Thus the majority of her landscapes or nature scenes are winter scenes. She loses her joy in the "tropical license" of summer because she feels barren; she exists in a wintery struggle for the survival of her own sanity and well-being.

Dickinson also uses nature to reflect interiority, and she uses winter more often than a reader of her many summer and spring poems might at first suspect. Edwin Folsom shows that although Thomas H. Johnson only classifies four of Dickinson's poems as winter poems, Dickinson mentions winter in thirty poems, mentions snow in sixty, and makes countless other references to ice, frost, and freezing. Although Folsom suggests that Dickinson uses winter as "the season that forces reality, that strips all hope of transcendence," he also argues that in Dickinson's poems that "external weather does not affect man as intensely as internal weather." Dickinson does not necessarily project her feeling of barrenness onto an exterior wasteland as Rossetti does, but Dickinson does use images of winter to express pain or despair of transcendence. One persona remembers great pain, "As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow--/
First--Chill--then Stupor--then the letting go--" ($341). In "When I hoped, I recollect" ($768), hope keeps another
speaker warm and protects her from sleet and frost. But
fear transforms this interior warmth to a frozen stillness--

When I feared--I recollect
Just the Day it was--
Worlds were lying out to Sun--
Yet how Nature froze--

Icicles upon my soul
Prickled Blue and Cool--
Bird went praising everywhere--
Only Me--was still--

During these times of fear and pain, winter represents
the struggle to survive. Dickinson's winter imagery does
not illustrate barrenness, in the same way as Rossetti's,
but shows rather rigidity and immobility. She feels her
pain, not through a lack of fruitfulness on her part, but
through an inability to escape the confines of the frost.
Winter expresses imprisonment, deathlike confinement. In
the previous poem, the "bird went praising everywhere,"
while she "was still." If the bird symbolizes the poet for
Dickinson, then she feels the winter confines and freezes
her creativity as a poet. Dickinson describes how this
repression hurts the living more than death could hurt them:

'Tis not that Dying hurts us so--
'Tis Living--hurts us more--
But Dying--is a different way--
A Kind behind the Door--

The Southern Custom--of the Bird--
That ere the Frosts are due--
Accepts a better Latitude--
We--are the Birds--that stay.

The Shiverers round Farmers' doors--
For whose reluctant Crumb--
We stipulate--till pitying Snows
Persuade our Feathers Home.  (#335)

Living hurts the speaker of this poem because she is a bird that weathers out winter, an artist, such as Dickinson herself, who tries to sing in an environment which freezes her mobility and rewards her, if at all, with a "reluctant crumb." Of course the existence of the poems themselves contradicts Dickinson's expressions of simulated life and frozen immobility just as Rossetti's expressions of barrenness and emptiness do. Out of this deadness or lifelessness comes some of Dickinson's most living poetry, just as Rossetti's expressions of internal barrenness blossom into poetic abundance. Mossberg notices how in Dickinson's verse the "distressed voice is operative" and "seems to be fueled by the distress caused by its own fragmentation." Nevertheless, the struggle for survival in this poem as well as others makes dying seem a comfort--"till pitying Snows/ Persuade our Feathers Home." Home for both poets who locate place either as chaos "Without a Chance, or Spar--/ Or even a Report of Land" or as "stagnant space" with "No pulse of life through all the
loveless land" becomes death.

Both poets move from describing internal fragmentation and internal death to describing a desire for the ease of death. Dickinson's persona in "The Whole of it came not at once" (!761) imagines that "'Tis Life's award--to die." Although many of Dickinson’s speakers battle for freedom or recognition, many other of her poetic personae merely desire the peace of nothingness: "From Blank to Blank--/ A Threadless Way/ I pushed Mechanic feet--/ To stop--or perish--or advance--/ Alike indifferent" (!761). Likewise, Rossetti writes of death both as a relief or cessation from pain, and as an alternative to marriage. Bellas notices that Rossetti "often turned in her poetic life to imaginative or symbolic death as an alternative to conventual life or to one in which secular love, even marriage, would play a major role."

Both poets often portray the dying woman. In fact, the majority of Rossetti's ghosts or dying subjects are female, and Nina Baym notices that "Many more women than men, taking each elegiac poem as a single death, die in Dickinson's poems. . . . The structure of the universe, like the family structure is profoundly patriarchal." This does not mean that either poet believes that women die more frequently than men, but the poets do indicate that women may derive more benefits from death than from life.
For example, Rossetti often envisions death as pain's cessation, but Dickinson also writes, although not as frequently as Rossetti does, of death as an outlet for pain:

The Heart asks Pleasure--first--
And then--Excuse from Pain--
And then--those little Anodynes
That deaden suffering--

And then--to go to sleep--
And then--if it should be
The will of its Inquisitor
The privilege to die--  ($536)

The persona describes the process of pleasure and relief from pain as a process of asking and receiving. Oddly, she calls the official that grants either request the "Inquisitor," someone known for repressing or arbitrarily punishing dissidents and nonconformists. This speaker must feel that she herself is a dissident or nonconformist in order to describe the outside forces in her life as an "Inquisitor." Possibly Dickinson refers to herself here since she considered her writing as an "awful power" similar to a gun's power. Through the privilege of death, then, one escapes the punishment that results from nonconformity, or in Dickinson's case, that results from the secrecy of a woman's poetic career.

Rossetti writes of death as an escape from disappointments, pain, and responsibility. Dolores
Rosenblum believes that for Rossetti, "the dead woman can represent only the perfection of her reification in life: the face composed in death is an extension of the smiling mask in life. . . .; the dissolution of the grave is both a reflection of her selflessness and a resolution of her fragmentation." I cannot agree with Rosenblum on this issue, for although death may be the resolution of fragmentation, in the majority of Rossetti's poems, death heightens self-centeredness; a woman escapes through death the need for the "smiling mask in life."

Rossetti writes paradoxically, then, of the women to whom the loss of self is the height of selfishness, a total self-absorption. In Rossetti's poem "Looking Forward" (1849), death releases the persona from the responsibilities of life and fulfills her disappointments. The persona wants to shut out the cares and pains of life in sleep and death: "Sleep, let me sleep, for I am sick of care;/ Sleep, let me sleep, for my pain wearies me." But she is, as the poem's title suggests, "looking forward" to death as a blooming of her barren life. In death she can merge with nature and enjoy the fruitfulness of nature that her own barren life never knew:

Sweet thought that I may yet live and grow green,  
That leaves may yet spring from the withered root,  
And buds and flowers and berries half unseen.  
Then if you haply muse upon the past,
Say this: Poor child, she has her wish at last;
Barren through life, but in death bearing fruit.

(p. 294)

To Rossetti, death does not perfect the smiling mask in life, for the smiling mask developed out of a bundle of tensions and conflicting feelings. Death relaxes totally these tensions as the speaker describes a dead woman in "Life and Death" (1863): "Asleep from risk, asleep from pain" (p. 359). Rossetti writes poems on this theme throughout her life, so that "Sleeping at Last" (1893), a poem written near her death that characterizes many of her poems, often closes an anthology of Rossetti's poetry:

Sleeping at last, the trouble and tumult over,
Sleeping at last, the struggle and horror past,
Cold and white, out of sight of friend and of lover,
Sleeping at last.

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

Fast asleep. Singing birds in their leafy cover
Cannot wake her, nor shake her the gusty blast.
Under the purple thyme and the purple clover
Sleeping at last.

Although Rossetti uses irregular meter, she unifies the poem's structure in several ways. The lines alternate between 12 syllables and 11 syllables with the exception of the intrusion of the phrase "Sleeping at last" which ends
the first and last stanzas. All the 12 syllable lines rhyme, as do all the 11 syllable lines. The phrase, "Sleeping at last," rhymes with the 11 syllable lines. In addition, the repetition of the phrase, "Sleeping at last," which recurs 5 times, works to unify the poem, and also lulls the reader into a hypnotic restfulness similar to the dead sleeper's restfulness.

The poem's mood does not invoke the image of a woman's perfecting the smiling mask in life, particularly since the speaker stresses the sleeper's relief in hiding out—"out of sight of friend and of lover." Rather, this poem's death negates life's tensions. Stanza one emphasizes the relief from the physical effort of life, whether this effort represents the struggle of the "trouble and tumult" or the struggle to maintain a physical appearance that contradicts interior feelings. Stanza two emphasizes the relief from emotional pain, from the tired heart, the pangs, and the fears. The speaker exclaims how the sleeper so desires this "dreamless" escape that she even prefers this stasis over the pleasant springtime scene of singing birds, gusty winds, and purple flowers in stanza three. The speaker's mention of springtime, purple thyme, and purple clover in this last stanza, however, may emphasize the intermediacy of this sleep. Springtime reminds humans of rebirth, and purple, the color of Lent, symbolizes the period in the church
calendar that precedes the celebration of Christ's resurrection. The metaphor of death as sleep suggests an awakening into a new springtime existence.

To both Dickinson and Rossetti, death symbolizes more than relief through extinction; death symbolizes a woman's hope for self-transformation. Nina Auerbach explores this myth for the nineteenth-century and discovers that for both male and female writers, seemingly passive behavior in "mesmerized, somnambulistic, vampirized, or variously transfigured women" is actually active self-transformation: "all release their self-transforming powers in trance, death, or actual sleep. . . . Life and death, the transcendent and the inorganic, the timelessness of myth and the contemporaneity of technology, converge in an embodiment of womanhood whose supine stillness contains the powers of her age." In Rossetti's poem, "Dream Land" (1849), death transforms the sleeper's dreams into reality: "Sleep that no pain shall wake;/ Night that no morn shall break,/ Till joy shall overtake/ Her perfect peace" (p. 292).

But this knowledge or hope of transformation in death comes out of pain. Pain connects the poets to immortality, as Dickinson expresses in the following poem:

A nearness to Tremendousness--
An Agony procures--
Affliction ranges Boundlessness--
Vicinity to Laws
Contentment's quiet Suburb
Affliction cannot stay
In Acres--Its Location
Is Illocality--  (#963)

Just as pain moved her away from the normal bounds of physical existence, turning her definitions into negations, so pain moves her away from emotional boundaries—to the area just outside and surrounding laws. Pain blasts her out of the ordinary, out of "Contentment's quiet Suburb," into the extraordinary, into a place without surrounding objects or landmarks—"illocality." In other poems, such as "It was not Death," this illocality terrifies the speaker and feels like "Chaos--stopless--cool." But in this poem as well as others this fear transforms into vision: "whereas 'twas wilderness--/ It's better--almost Peace--" (#584).

Thus, fragmentation, despite the pain, becomes the catalyst for vision and for poetry. Both artists convey psychic fragmentation poetically as a struggle between artistic mobility and confined immobility. For Rossetti, fragmentation arises between the artistic black double and the ascetic Christian self. Dickinson symbolizes fragmentation with war rather than with Christian images. Both poets, however, reveal how fragmentation simultaneously dissolves the certainty of an integrated self and yet multiplies the self's identity out of confined silence.
From the tension of disunity and loss arises creativity and art. Landscapes of chaos and cobwebs reflect internal death. Rossetti's personae mask internal barrenness with external, rigid smiles, while Dickinson's personae continue outward feminine domestic duties while inwardly harboring bombs. Neither poets' personae exist without the tensions of a fragmented consciousness; only when writing about dead women, dying women, or women hoping for death does either poet write about peace.
Notes for Chapter 4


9. James 4:14


The Heavens: Paradox in Paradise

It's oh in Paradise that I fain would be,
Away from earth and weariness and all beside:
Earth is too full of loss with its dividing sea,
But Paradise upbuilds the bower for the bride.
---Christina Rossetti

The grave my little cottage is,
Where "Keeping house" for thee
I make my parlor orderly
And lay the marble tea.
---Emily Dickinson

Consolation literature, which dwells on the glories of death and the domestic character of heaven, flourished in the nineteenth-century, particularly in America. Ann Douglas suggests that the image of heaven as home resulted from speculation on the millenium, a religious doctrine that projected "a period of a thousand years before the Last Judgment in which Christ and his saints would rule on the earth." The millenial debate blurred the distinction between millenial and heavenly lives and developed questions about "the nature of heaven: kingdom or home?" Douglas proposes that women writers, such as Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, furthered the image of heaven as a domestic home since in the home women "would dominate rather than be dominated." Imagining heaven as home increased women's 1 power over spirituality and death. But this literature
only exploited the feminine stereotype that a woman's place was in the home and idealized the qualities of meekness and subservience that kept them powerless.

Nevertheless, consolation literature created an impact on religious writings, especially on women's religious writings. Neither Dickinson nor Rossetti escapes the influence of consolation writers. Many critics, in fact, identify Dickinson with this movement. Both Dickinson and Rossetti write poems that console the wounded living with heavenly images of perfected domestic bliss. Rossetti writes metaphorically and uses earthly images to define heaven. But Rossetti's description of paradise as a place that recapitulates in perfect form the imperfect earth entraps her within the same narrow system that she desires to escape from. She entangles herself within a domestic paradise and her own assertions of faith double back into questions of doubt. Dickinson, however, does not write with the one to one correspondence of metaphor. Instead, she uses metonymy; her expressions and references expand out of established codes to create new systems. Thus, certain poems appear contradictory since Dickinson does not use metaphor to establish truth, but to question existing institutions. Dickinson may use the image of heaven as a domestic home, but only to question and finally destroy the image. Rossetti's verse seeks for a heavenly place to
substitute for an earthly void, while Dickinson's discards the consolation of finding a place in order to create a voice.

Rossetti writes of telic time that ends, for Christians, with the joy of eternal life. G. B. Tennyson rightly places Rossetti as an inheritor of the Tractarian mode of poetry. Her religious poetry records faithfully the sins of this world, Christ's love and sacrifice, and the expected joys of heaven. "Some Feasts and Fasts" includes 68 poems that celebrate occasions in the Church Year, similar to poems written also for church occasions by the Tractarian, John Keble. As Tennyson suggests, such poetry "grows out of an act of worship and liturgical observance." This Tractarian influence colors even her secular poetry; for instance, her didactic ending for "Goblin Market" follows Keble's poetic creed that poetry should awaken moral as well as religious feelings.

But Rossetti's discontent and unhappiness in this world also affects the character of her religious poetry. Germaine Greer considers that Rossetti's religious longings stem solely from earthly discontent:

[Rossetti's] work . . . is the poetry of waiting, passive, dumb and unresigned, as much for Death as for God, for of her life she made a torture where release from pain was sweetest pleasure.
Greer reacts harshly toward Rossetti's religious expressions, but Greer's reactions ring true for many of Rossetti's poems. Dolores Rosenblum also suggests that the sinners' blind watching and waiting for God in Rossetti's poetry makes her religious work a "poetry of alienation, the self conscious only of its division and its separation from a distant God." Even poems that display a forthright faith in Christ and heaven also enact a general uneasiness:

Does the road wind up-hill all the way?  
Yes, to the very end.  
Will the day's journey take the whole long day?  
From morn to night, my friend.

But is there for the night a resting-place?  
A roof for when the slow dark hours begin.  
May not the darkness hide it from my face?  
You cannot miss that inn.

Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?  
Those who have gone before.  
Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?  
They will not keep you standing at that door.

Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?  
Of labour you shall find the sum.  
Will there be beds for me and all who seek?  
Yea, beds for all who come. (p. 339)

This poem, "Uphill" (1858), enacts a regular question and answer that affirms heaven as a comfortable inn. Rossetti's use of traditional metaphors that compare man's life to one day, his death to the night, life's passage to an uphill journey, and heaven to a resting place lend
security to the truth of the answerer's replies. But there remains an underlying insecurity in the structure of the poem. The identities of the questioner and the answerer remain mysterious, as do the validity of their replies. How do we know we can trust the certainty of the second speaker? The questioner's incessant need for reassurance undercuts the answerer's definitive answers. In fact, the second speaker reassures the first speaker only of the inability to miss the inn and of the availability of beds. Otherwise he speaks of the long and difficult journey and of the "slow dark hours'" beginning. The second speaker reassures the first of a resting place, but his images remain dark and bleak.

More often, however, Rossetti's heavenly images resemble the abundance and riches of earth. But much of this poetry deconstructs on the premise that Rossetti's depiction of the afterlife continues earthly pleasures or delights that Rossetti indicates the faithful Christian should renounce or avoid while on earth. Other poems build heaven paradoxically from the same images of despised earth. When she describes a vision of heaven in "Paradise" (1854), she describes a garden in springtime with flowers blooming "More fair . . . than waking eyes/ Have seen in all this world of ours," with birds singing notes so "full of grace" that even the nightingale's song in this world seems cold by
comparison, and with a fourfold River which refreshes the thirsty and gives "fainting spirits strength and rest" better than any earthly drink. The Tree of Life buds with an abundance of fruit that heals the world, satiates the hungry, and tastes "sweeter than honey." Gold lines the streets, and the sound of harps sweetens the air. Rossetti metaphorically describes heaven with the images of spring and the riches of the earth, but she believes in the truth of her metaphors, since she culls these images from the Bible, particularly from Revelation 21 and 22.

In these books, John describes how he sees a new heaven and a new earth wherein the new Jerusalem glimmers as a city of gold with a pure river of life and a tree of life that could heal the world. Rossetti places her emphasis on God's statement in Revelation 21: "Behold, I make all things new." She envisions heaven as this world in newness and perfection. The paradox within Rossetti's poetry comes from her presentation of heaven as a new earth that appeals to a human's carnal senses. Her persona sees, hears, tastes, and touches the pleasures of paradise. The indulgence in nature's bounty that Rossetti renounces in this world becomes the basis in her poetry for the eternal satiation of paradise.

This paradox comes forth in clear relief when Rossetti discusses both earth and heaven in the same poem. "Passing
Away" (1860) distinguishes the sorrow of this world from the joys of heaven:

Passing away, saith the World, passing away:  
Chances, beauty, and youth, sapped day by day:  
Thy life never continueth in one stay.  
Is the eye waxen dim, is the dark hair changing to grey  
That hath won neither laurel nor bay?  
I shall clothe myself in Spring and bud in May:  
Thou, root-stricken, shalt not rebuild thy decay  
On my bosom for aye.  
Then I answered: Yea.

Passing away, saith my Soul, passing away:  
With its burden of fear and hope, of labour and play,  
Hearken what the past doth witness and say:  
Rust in thy gold, a moth is in thine array,  
A canker is in thy bud, thy leaf must decay.  
At midnight, at cockcrow, at morning, one certain day  
Lo the Bridegroom shall come and shall not delay;  
Watch thou and pray.  
Then I answered: Yea.

Passing away, saith my God, passing away:  
Winter passeth after the long delay:  
New grapes on the vine, new figs on the tender spray,  
Turtle calleth turtle in Heaven's May.  
Though I tarry, wait for Me, trust Me, watch and pray:  
Arise, come away, night is past and lo it is day,  
My love, My sister, My spouse, thou shalt hear Me say.  
Then I answered: Yea.  (p. 191)

Rossetti uses repetition throughout the poem to transform a sense of death into a sense of life. In the first stanza, the world speaks to the persona of time's "passing away" and its effect upon her. The world renews itself with seasonal change, "I shall clothe myself in Spring and bud in May,"
but the world reminds her that the passage of time will only sap "chance, beauty, and youth" away from the persona, "Thou, root-stricken, shalt not rebuild thy decay." The persona affirms the despair of the world's statement, "Then I answered: Yea." In the second stanza, the soul speaks to the persona of the "passing away" of material wealth; gold rusts and moths eat our clothing. The soul reminds the speaker also of the rottenness within herself: "A canker is in thy bud, thy leaf must decay." But the soul inserts hope that the Bridegroom will come, and the persona affirms the soul's statement on decay with the ray of hope for Christ's coming, "Then I answered: Yea."

In the final stanza, God speaks to the persona of the "passing away" of winter and night and the coming of heaven's springtime. The poem's repetition of "passing away" transforms this expression from despair over the passage and disappearance of life's glory to hope over the passage of life's misery and the appearance of heaven's glory. God promises to claim the persona as his love, sister, and spouse, and the persona's affirmation, "Then I answered: Yea," becomes finally an affirmation of hope rather than despair as in the first two stanzas.

But Rossetti uses the same expressions to convey both despair and hope, and in the final stanza, those expressions never lose their connotations of decay and hopelessness.
Rossetti knits her poem tightly by using the same rhyme for 26 lines, but this strategy again works not only to transform the corruption of the first two stanzas into the renewal of the last, but also to carry the corruption forward into the last stanza's heaven. Similarly, the images of natural decay throughout the poem, particularly the powerful images of "root-stricken" and "a canker . . . in thy bud," undercut the natural images of heaven's springtime growth. Although Rossetti intends to create a poem that affirms our salvation through Christ, her poem's sense of decay and earthly corruption overpower the joy of salvation and leave the reader feeling melancholic.

Finally, as Albert D. Hutter also notes, Rossetti's final stanza evokes the language in chapter 2 of the "Song of Soloman":

10 My beloved spake, and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.
11 For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone;
12 the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land;
13 the fig tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

The Biblical echo speaks to the transitory and carnal pleasures that Rossetti contends the Christian must renounce
and transcend. Rossetti chooses her images of heaven from a sensuous celebration of springtime and love. This world, which her personae perceive as "a thorn-choked garden plot" ("From Sunset to Star Rise"), a place where "Bare poplars shivered tall/ And lank vines stretched to see" ("May"), or "a land with . . . / No bud-time, no leaf-falling/ . . . No pulse of life through all the loveless land" ("Cobwebs"), transforms in paradise to become "Heaven's May." Within the context of Rossetti's canon, heaven compensates for earth only by becoming the perfect earth; Rossetti's personae who find on an imperfect earth only barrenness and loneliness will discover in heaven springtime fertility and love.

An early poem, "A Portrait" (1850), sets out in two sonnet stanzas this paradox between earthly Christian asceticism and heavenly satiation of earthlike delights. In the first stanza, Rossetti describes a woman who hates and renounces the pleasures of this world for Jesus' sake:

She gave up beauty in her tender youth,  
Gave all her hope and joy and pleasant ways;  
She covered up her eyes lest they should gaze  
On vanity, and chose the bitter truth.  
Harsh towards herself, towards others full of ruth,  
Servant of servants, little known to praise,  
Long prayers and fasts trenched on her nights and days:  
She schooled herself to sights and sounds uncouth  
That with the poor and stricken she might make  
A home, until the least of all sufficed  
Her wants; her own self learned she to forsake,  
Counting all earthly gain but hurt and loss.  
So with calm will she chose and bore the cross  
And hated all for love of Jesus Christ. (p. 286)
Rossetti paints a portrait of a woman who after giving up "beauty," "hope," "joy," and "pleasant ways" for Christianity loses in her bitterness the capacity for praise. She has humbled herself to be "servant of servants" and forsaken all comforts except for what supplies her barest needs. But she paradoxically has "hated all for love of Jesus Christ." Her Christianity which should develop love within her has soured her to anything connected to this world and caused her to love only the eternal. A philosophy that should liberate her from the destruction of this world further entrenches and imprisons her within a destructive pattern of living.

But the second stanza of "A Portrait" describes the beauty of the Christian woman's death. She exists no longer as "harsh" and "fasting," "poor" and "stricken" within a world whose gain represents only "hurt and loss." Rather, "all pain had left her" and as the sun shines upon her, she becomes emblematic of this world's pleasures:

O lily flower, O gem of priceless worth,
O dove with patient voice and patient eyes,
O fruitful vine amid a land of dearth,
O maid replete with loving purities.

The love she rejected on earth materializes in heaven; she is now the bride, the pure virgin, going to meet her
bridegroom: "In her heart she said: 'Heaven opens; I leave these and go away;' The Bridegroom calls,—shall the Bride seek to stay?" The bitterness of hate and "dearth" in this world dissolves into the love and bounty of joining Christ in death. But Rossetti paradoxically depicts the heavenly union in earthly terms, just as she describes the dying woman with the glories of the earth that the woman renounces in the first stanza. Heaven becomes for Rossetti's persona the garden of peace that earth failed to provide her.

Rossetti furthers her image of heaven as an earthly home through her descriptions of heavenly marriages. Christ as the bridegroom conveys the intimacy of a Christian's union with God. But in Rossetti's poetry, a union with Christ in heaven often replaces failed unions between lovers on earth. Dombrowski also notices that heavenly unions seem only to replace failures on earth: "Those who fail to achieve a unity with another in life achieve in death a greater unity with Christ, the Heavenly Bridegroom." In "The Heart Knoweth Its Own Bitterness" (1857), the persona longs for someone to penetrate the surface mask that she shows the world, and in that union to have another individual gain a total understanding of her inner self, "I long for one to stir my deep--/ I have had enough of help and gift--/ I long for one to search and sift/ Myself, to take myself and keep" (p. 192). (Notice in her pronominal repetition "myself, to
take myself," Rossetti attempts to assert the persona's hidden self through emphasis. But the multiplying or mirroring of pronouns weakens the original's significance, just as the disguising or masking of inner selves weakens the self's united identity, a phenomenon that recurs throughout Rossetti's and Dickinson's poetry and that was discussed in further detail in Chapter 4.) The persona finds that the reality of such a union will not occur on earth; she must wait for her union with Christ:

Not in this world of hope deferred
This world of perishable stuff,—
Eye hath not seen nor ear hath heard
Nor heart conceived that full 'enough':
Here moans the separating sea,
Here harvests fail, here breaks the heart:
There God shall join and no man part,
I full of Christ and Christ of me.

Paradoxically the persona's desire for a spiritual union with Christ arises from her desire for a physical union with a man. Rossetti strengthens this paradox with her "here"/"there" grammatical construction that equates heaven with earth. The desires on earth become the primary satisfactions of heaven.

But more importantly, Rossetti's problems with her society on earth become her solutions for heaven. Rossetti's single women, unwed mothers, or even confined
wives who do not fit into Ruskin's plan for women in "Of Queen's Gardens" remain miserable in the restrictions and punishments of their patriarchal society. Ruskin spoke for the society that revered women who created and guarded the sanctity of the garden of home and that blamed and punished women who fit outside of this feminine mold and who tried to create a new reality for themselves within realms traditionally reserved for men. Instead of blaming her discontent with earth on the structure of society and women's relegated place within it, Rossetti imagines instead that heaven will compensate for the setbacks of this world and will exist as a garden home, only without the area outside that harbors "unfit" women. In Rossetti's heaven, every woman receives a home with Christ as their bridegroom and eternal springtime as their garden.

Rossetti pushes the image of heaven as a perfected home so far in some poems as to depict not only a heavenly bridal union with Christ but also heavenly reunions of failed lovers on earth. In "Memory" (1865), the persona cheers her "worn life's autumn weather" with hopes of a reunion with her lost lover in heaven: "I watch there with clear eyes,/ And think how it will be in Paradise/ When we're together" (p. 335). The speaker in another poem, "Saints and Angels" (1876), longs to escape from the weariness and separateness of this world and wishes to join her earthly ex-lover in the
bridal bower of paradise:

It's oh in Paradise that I fain would be,
Away from earth and weariness and all beside;
Earth is too full of loss with its dividing sea,
But Paradise upbuilds the bower for the bride.

Where flowers are yet in bud while the boughs are green,
I would get quit of earth and get robed for heaven;
Putting on my raiment white within the screen,
Putting on my crown of gold whose gems are seven.

Fair is the fourfold river that maketh no moan,
Fair are the trees fruitbearing of the wood,
Fair are the gold and bdellium and the onyx stone,
And I know the gold of that land is good.

O my love, my dove, lift up your eyes
Toward the eastern gate like an opening rose;
You and I who parted will meet in Paradise,
Pass within and sing when the gates unclose.

This life is but the passage of a day,
This life is but a pang and all is over,
But in the life to come which fades not away
Every love shall abide and every lover.

He who wore out pleasure and mastered all lore,
Solomon wrote 'Vanity of vanities':
Down to death, of all that went before
In his mighty long life, the record is this.

With loves by the hundred, wealth beyond measure,
Is this he who wrote 'Vanity of vanities'?
Yea, 'Vanity of vanities' he saith of pleasure,
And of all he learned set his seal to this. (p. 249)

In "Saints and Angels," Rossetti contrasts earth with her vision of paradise. Earth is "weariness" and "too full of loss with its dividing sea." Earth also harbors the pleasures that King Solomon tried and labeled as vanities.
But the very pleasures that Solomon would call vanities, sex and wealth, create Rossetti's paradise. Her persona longs for heaven's "bower for the bride" where "every love shall abide and every lover" and imagines her "crown of gold whose gems are seven" in a land where "fair are the gold and bdellium and the onyx stone." Rossetti's personal version of the Christian paradox lies in her emphasis on the luxuriousness of paradise, even though this luxuriousness issues directly from the barrenness of earthly existence. Her vision of paradise attempts to compensate for earthly emptiness, but her vision deconstructs on the premise that her paradise consists of earth's abundance.

Rossetti reaffirms in her religious verse that a woman can function pleasantly only as wife, lover, and procreator, even though in her secular verse Rossetti pictures the stagnant and imprisoning quality of this position. Her metaphoric vision entraps her within earth rather than liberates her from earth.

Dickinson's metonymic visions, on the other hand, provide her with a new vision of eternal life and compensation for death. But her vision necessitates a painful loss of faith. The creation of an eternal voice dominates in Dickinson's poetry over the creation of an eternal place. Dickinson describes death as a place, particularly as a domestic home, only to mock the image:
The grave my little cottage is,
Where "Keeping house" for thee
I make my parlor orderly
And lay the marble tea.

For two divided, briefly,
A cycle, it may be,
Till everlasting life unite
In strong society. (#1743)

The persona believes in the security of death as a continuation of the life she knows. She will meet her love in death and will continue to order her own existence. Dickinson reflects the speaker's confidence in this order by strictly ordering her stanzas. Dickinson does not vary from the ballad form either through her meter or her rhymes, and both stanzas contain grammatical sentences.

But Dickinson's playful tone and even her use of the ballad form reveal her own ironic or mocking stance toward her persona's views on death. She sarcastically capitalizes and surrounds with quotation marks the phrase, "Keeping house," and laughs at the idea of keeping house in death since the homemaker would have to serve "marble tea." The ballad stanza implies "an illusion of primitive sincerity and openness." Dickinson's sardonic tone within a perfect ballad stanza makes the form of the poem contribute to her irony. Her one to one correspondence between paradise and home breaks down with her use of "grave" instead of
"paradise" for the place of death. The grave brings connotations of a molding body confined within a narrow box, an image inappropriate to the idea of making an orderly parlor for two united in everlasting life.

The "grave" in other of Dickinson's poems frightens her personae rather than comforts them:

Unit, like Death, for Whom?
True, like the Tomb,
Who tells no secret
Told to Him--
The Grave is strict--
Tickets admit
Just two--the Bearer--
And the Borne--
And seat--just One--
The Living--tell--
The Dying--but a Syllable--
The Coy Dead--None--
No Chatter--here--no tea--
So Babbler, and Bohea--stay there--
But Gravity--and Expectation--and Fear--
A tremor just, that All's not sure. (§408)

This poem conveys the same playful tone that could talk of serving marble tea, but the difference lies in the persona's terror of the grave; her playfulness reveals itself as masking an underlying seriousness and fear. Dickinson bases the poem's metaphor on the playful image of the "coy dead" who do not tell the secrets of the grave (a theatrical performance that admits and seats only one). But the metaphor falls apart when faced with reality. In the grave,
there exists no "little cottage," "No Chatter--here--no tea." Instead, we know only the severity of death, "Gravity--and Expectation--and Fear--." The lack of any regularity in stanzaic form, meter, rhyme, and syntax reflect this persona's own insecurity about any order or familiarity in death: "All's not sure."

But this very idea of the unknown fueled Dickinson's imagination. Dickinson wrote to Louise and Frances Norcross in 1876: "It is true that the unknown is the largest need of the intellect, though for it, no one thinks to thank God" (L, II, p. 559). Unlike Rossetti who filled the unknown with the known system of Christianity, the unknown inspired Dickinson to question known systems and imagine new vistas. None of the images in Dickinson's poem on paradise resemble Biblical metaphors for heaven as Rossetti's images in her "Paradise" do:

I went to Heaven--
'Twas a small Town--
Lit--with a Ruby--
Lathed--with Down--

Stiller--than the fields
At the full Dew--
Beautiful--as Pictures--
No Man drew.
People--like the Moth--
Of Mechlin--frames--
Duties--of Gossamer--
And Eider--names--

(#374)
Unlike Rossetti who chooses her images of heaven from Revelation and rebuilds heaven as the perfection of this earth, Dickinson describes a place unknown, "Beautiful--as Pictures--/ No Man drew," and ephemeral in its airiness. Although she lights her heaven "with a Ruby," Dickinson's heaven does not reward through splendor and riches, but rather this heaven comforts like sleep. The ruby emits a soft rather than a harsh light; down pads and softens sharp edges; and the inhabitants live as fine and unthreatening as moths and lace.

Dickinson's images expand out rather than close in as Rossetti's do. The familiarity in the beginning of the poem, that heaven resembles a "small town," evaporates in the end of the poem into the unfamiliarity and lightness of a cloud. Dickinson imagines her heaven only in art, and she does not see this place she has created as truth. She even raises the question, will such stillness, softness, and comfort create happiness? She ends the poem with the thought: "Almost--contented--/ I--could be--/ 'Mong such unique/ Society--." This ephemeral image rises out of Dickinson's imagination, whereas Rossetti expands her images from biblical metaphors.

For although Dickinson plays with the image of heaven as a small town, she disbelieves the consolation literature's approach to heaven as an earthly place:
Is Heaven a Place—a Sky—a Tree?  
Location's narrow way is for Ourselves—  
Unto the Dead  
There's no Geography--        ($489)

Dickinson realizes, as Rossetti does not, that our manmade images for heaven console us in a "narrow way" that fails to expand and encompass the vastness of death. Nevertheless, Dickinson also imagines, as Rossetti does, the possibilities of marriages and reunions of lovers in heaven. (See for instance the heavenly reunions of earthly lovers in "'Twas a long Parting" ($625) and "I cannot live with You--" ($640) in which Dickinson posits possible reunions but at the same time remains uncertain about their occurrence.) Just as her images of the place of heaven implode when she faces the reality of the grave, so do Dickinson's fantasies of heavenly unions disintegrate when she faces the realities of earthly unions.

Dickinson's heavenly and earthly unions in fact do resemble one another. Critics quote the same poetry to prove both the positions that Dickinson heightens her male lovers to godlike status and that Dickinson symbolizes salvation through ordinary love relationships. For instance, Nina Baym explains how "Dickinson's poetry illustrates a residual traditionalism" since "the idea of
man as woman's god is traditional in religious teaching for women, who were enjoined as a matter of course to live for the god in their men while their men lived for God." On the other hand, Michael Dressman contends that Dickinson "did not simply attach mystical terms to a treatment of ordinary marriage" but rather uses marriage "as a symbol of salvation." Dickinson's ambiguity validates both critical positions. Her collapsing of earthly and heavenly unions, however, leads to the tragic paradox of her disbelieve in order to create a more equitable reality.

Dickinson merges marriage and salvation in her poetry because both states involve unity. Whereas Rossetti's personae seek a bridal relationship with Christ because they long for the ultimate merging of the self with God ("There God shall join and no man part,/ I full of Christ and Christ of me," ["The Heart Knoweth Its Own Bitterness," p. 193]), Dickinson's personae resist this union of divine marriage just as they do the union of earthly marriage because of the fear that either union will dissolve identity and individuality. Dickinson describes both love and death as a fading of identity into a more powerful entity:

The Drop, that wrestles in the Sea--
Forgets her own locality--
As I--toward Thee--

Content of fading
Is enough for me--
Fade I unto Divinity--

The personae in these two poems seem to long for this self-dissolving unity, but the images in the poems undermine expressed desires for unity and indicate fear and disgust rather than longing. The metaphor of a drop in the sea denigrates selfhood. The word "fading" describes not a glorious unity, but rather a weak self-effacement. Within the longings for unity, we hear opposite notes of wariness and anxiety. Unlike Rossetti who imagines marital bliss in heaven even though she perceives and writes of the failures of such unions on earth, Dickinson questions the use of imperfect earthly analogies to describe a perfect heaven.

Dickinson never speaks outright her disdain for a self-denying unity either in death or in love, but she covertly conveys this disdain in her poetry. In "Title divine--is mine!," a poem that could refer either to secular or divine unity through marriage, Dickinson describes how the woman in such a marriage dies to herself as she submits her will to another:

Title divine--is mine!
The Wife--without the Sign!
Acute Degree--conferred on me--
Empress of Calvary!
Royal--all but the Crown!
Betrothed--without the swoon
God sends us Women--
When you—hold—Garnet to Garnet—
Gold—to Gold—
Born—Bridalled—Shrouded—
In a Day—
Tri Victory
"My Husband"—women say—
Stroking the Melody—
Is this—the way?  (§1072)

Dickinson subverts a positive exuberance toward marriage with a continuing double-talk throughout this poem. Part of the language speaks of the honor and privilege of the wife. Dickinson calls the position of wife the "Title Divine" and exalts her to the status of "Empress," "Royal—all but the Crown!" The woman conquers marriage in a "Tri-Victory" that allows her the privilege of "Stroking the Melody" in the sound of "My Husband."

But yet Dickinson's metaphor for the wife's royal position renounces the self, "Empress of Calvary." The wife crucifies her old self for the sake of others. The passive verbs throughout the poem indicate that the process of becoming a wife happens to a woman through someone else's devices or coercion. The "acute" degree of wife is "conferred on" her. She is "Born—Bridalled—Shrouded." The passive verbs convey the wife's inability to act now for herself; she passively allows others to control her. For she is now "bridled" as well as "bridalled," and "shrouded" in a death-like existence since she has crucified her old
identity. The "Tri-Victory" belongs, then, not to the wife, but to the actor in the poem, to the husband or god who controls and shapes the wife's new existence. She questions and asks for instructions even in her act of pleasure in her new role, her "stroking" the sound of the possession of a husband, "Is this—the way?" The woman who appears to speak exuberantly of marriage (with exclamation marks) actually finds herself confined into inaction—"bridled," "shrouded," and passive.

Dickinson portrays the power of the husband (and by analogy, the power of God?) as potentially damaging to her individual creativity. The lover that Dickinson bestows with divinity in other poems becomes oppressive in his omnipresence as a husband:

All that I do
Is in review
To his enamored mind
I know his eye
Where e'er I ply
Is pushing close behind
Not any Port
Nor any flight
But he doth there preside
What omnipresence lies in wait
For her to be a Bride

The poem at first seems to compliment the speaker as she describes her husband's "enamored mind." The word "enamored" indicates that his close watchfulness comes from his love and desire to encompass the charm of her
activities. But this "love" stifles her through his suffocating and inescapable pervasiveness. His eye is "pushing close behind" and all roads for escape—any port or any flight—are blocked by his presence. He changes in the poem from the passive state of being enamored of her to the active oppression of presiding over her. His presence exercises control and authority over her activity; her freedom of thought and action disappear when she becomes his bride. Dickinson cannot so assuredly posit the heavenly joy of a heavenly marriage as Rossetti does since Dickinson imagines, as Rossetti does not, that earthly metaphors carry the same connotations, whether good or bad, for heaven as well as for earth.

Just as Rossetti metaphorically applies her desire for unity in life to a desire for a perfect heavenly marriage, so Dickinson transfers her fears about her loss of identity and mobility in marriage to her fears about a loss of individuality in paradise. When a persona imagines herself in heaven, she fears for her identity:

I felt my life with both my hands
To see if it was there—
I held my spirit to the Glass,
To prove it possibler—

I turned my Being round and round
And paused at every pound
To ask the Owner's name—
For doubt, that I should know the Sound—

I judged my features—jarred my hair—
I pushed my dimples by, and waited—
If they--twinkled back--
Conviction might, of me--

I told myself, "Take Courage, Friend--
That--was a former time--
But we might learn to like the Heaven,
As well as our Old Home!"  

Dickinson imagines heaven here through the convention that heaven recreates our old home in a new but still familiar home. But Dickinson's persona discovers fragmentation and unfamiliarity in the "new home." Heaven causes her to question the existence of her old identity; the persona fails to recognize her "life," her "spirit," her "being," or her "features." The speaker tries to discover her old identity with her senses of touch, sight, and sound, but the uncertainty of this new time compared with the "former time" leaves her in doubt as to whom she has become. In the last stanza, the speaker attempts to give herself courage by suggesting the possibility that she may like heaven as well as earth. But the speaker remains doubtful and fragmented since she says "we might learn to like the Heaven." She uses the plural "we" since the old self and the new self remain separated, "I told myself"; the phrase "might learn" suggests only the possibility of future enjoyment of heaven. Nevertheless, the result of her self-questioning does lead to the possibility of a future affirmation of self-hood.

Dickinson's uncertainty over the place and nature of
paradise stems partly from her uncertainty over Christianity. Dickinson perceives Christianity as Rossetti does, that is, as the need to renounce this world for the eternal. But Dickinson did not desire to "hate all for the love of Christ." Unlike Rossetti who devoted herself to her church's congregation, Dickinson never did formally acknowledge Christ as her savior by joining the local church and confessing her faith. While her friends and family joined the church, she stood alone in her refusals to submit. In 1848 she wrote to her friend Abiah Root and admitted her guilt at remaining a non-Christian: "It is not now too late, so my friends tell me, so my offended conscience whispers, but it is hard for me to give up the world" (L, I, 67). The thought of giving up the experiences of this world for a more perfect reality remained difficult for Dickinson. She wrote to Susan Gilbert Dickinson around 1870, "Oh Matchless Earth--We underrate the chance to dwell in Thee" (L, II, 478) and said to Thomas Higginson in the same year, "I find ecstasys in living--the mere sense of living is joy enough." Even during life's pain, she could say to Mrs. Higginson: "I fear we have all sorrow, though of different forms--but with Life so very sweet at the Crisp, what must it be unfrozen!" (L, II, 560). Ironically, Rossetti who despised this world recreated this world in her images of paradise, while Dickinson who loved this earth
remained unwilling to imagine paradise as this earth's recreation.

Dickinson's uncertainty over Christianity and paradise comes also from the emergence of the scientific age. Dickinson wrote as the doubting Thomas who lives in a scientific age and requires evidences: "'Faith' is fine invention/ When Gentlemen can see--/ But Microscopes are prudent/ In an Emergency" (#185). Without empirical evidence, God and heaven remain unknowns, and familiar metaphors of home cannot explain sufficiently for Dickinson eternity's presence. Dickinson paradoxically questions faith with scientific scrutiny, a scrutiny that subverts the concept of faith. But in some ways Dickinson's scientific language works to reinforce as well as to undercut her faith.

Dickinson closely scrutinizes faith with her own type of scientific analysis. For example, in the following poems, she starts with an hypothesis and then tests this hypothesis against her own reality:

This World is not Conclusion.
A Species stands beyond--
Invisible, as Music--
But positive, as Sound--  (#501)

I know that He exists.
Somewhere--in Silence--
He has hid his rare life
From our gross eyes.  (#338)
Both of these poems begin with a single declarative sentence that ends with a period, a rare occurrence in Dickinson's verse. These short sentences lend strength to her statements of faith in God and in life after death. But Dickinson follows such strong declarations of faith in both poems with questions. Although she intuits eternity and divinity, she remains uncertain about the precepts of Christianity, particularly the domestic paradise proposed by Christian "consolation" writers.

The poem, "This World is not Conclusion," begins as a statement of faith in heaven, but ends as a treatise on the unknowable quality of eternity:

This World is not Conclusion.  
A Species stands beyond—  
Invisible, as Music—  
But positive, as Sound—  
It beckons, and it baffles—  
Philosophy—don't know—  
And through a Riddle, at the last—  
Sagacity, must go—  
To guess it, puzzles scholars—  
Contempt of Generations  
And Crucifixion, shown—  
Faith slips—and laughs, and rallies—  
Blushes, if any see—  
Plucks at a twig of Evidence—  
And asks a Vane, the way—  
Much Gesture, from the Pulpit—  
Strong Hallelujahs roll—  
Narcotics cannot still the Tooth  
That nibbles at the soul— ($501$)
"Philosophy," "Sagacity," and "Faith" intuit the eternal, but intuition remains only a "Riddle" with at best nothing more substantial than "a twig of Evidence" to prove the eternal's existence. All of time's wisdom and knowledge convey finally nothing about death. The "Crucifixion" attempted to "gain" certainty of the eternal, but the poem's speaker sees Christianity as little more than a type of drug to ease the edge of this unknown: "Narcotics cannot still the Tooth/ That nibbles at the soul." But even though Dickinson cannot accept the earnestness from the pulpit, she does not totally relinquish her hope of everlasting life. She describes problems with men whose faith "laughs" and "slips" and "rallies" and ends up asking a "vane," a man-made contrivance that changes direction with the wind, for "the way," divine providence. She doubts the comforting narcotics of Christianity, that is, the Christianity that she hears from the pulpit, but she continues to grapple with the concepts of eternity.

One theory about the reasons behind Dickinson's revolt against Christianity connects Christianity with the established rules of society. Barbara Mossberg reasons that Dickinson, who wanted freedom from domesticity for poetic work, felt that conforming to religion and society meant becoming like her mother, someone who had sacrificed (in Dickinson's eyes) her own identity to serve others' needs.
Mossberg considers that Dickinson equates loving Christ with loving housework: "an alliance between church and home which insists upon her self-sacrifice and keeps her from worldly gain." To escape female servitude, Dickinson felt she must not conform to the teachings of the church, must denounce her mother's approval, and must attain her father's approval. Critics such as Mossberg consider that Dickinson transferred her failure to attain her father's approval of her poetry to her fears of God's absence in the world. Her own father never assisted her in her lonely struggle to become a poet; hence, she saw God, the father, as absent in her struggle through life.

This theory does have validity, but Dickinson's doubts about Christianity extend beyond her need for acceptance into male society. Dickinson does have problems with the concept of God, the Father, because she cannot (or refuses to) place God or eternity into familiar domestic images. If He is a father, He acts as a cruel and absent father rather than a loving and present one. She finds His giving only to then take what He has given away an ambiguous cruelty: "Burglar! Banker--Father!" (49). As she orders his titles, God resembles a thief or a capitalistic swindler more than a "loving" father. She has trouble believing that God guides his actions through "love":
Far from Love the Heavenly Father
Leads the Chosen Child,
Oftener through Realm of Briar
Than the Meadow mild.

Oftener by the Claw of Dragon
Than the Hand of Friend
Guides the Little One predestined
To the Native Land.  

In this poem, Dickinson transforms the "Heavenly Father" into a dragon with claws. She contrasts the innocence of the "Chosen Child" who trustingly follows where others lead him to the cruelty of the father who leads such innocence with the claw of a dragon "through Realm of Briar." Nina Baym characterizes such poems as recording the final Puritan "dissolution of a bond of love and gratitude between man and God and the perversion of the idea of Covenant into the idea of the confidence game, the swindle."  

But more often, Dickinson's speakers walk alone, without even the guidance of a con-man. In "I know that He exists" (#338), Dickinson expresses her belief in God's existence; He only seems a myth because of his absence. The persona playfully conjectures that God is only playing a game of hide-and-seek: "'Tis an instant's play./ 'Tis a fond Ambush." But the fear remains that the play may "Prove piercing earnest" and "Death's--stiff--stare--" will not even reveal the "jesting" divinity. She wonders in another poem if the secrets of eternity justify the lonely struggle
to achieve them:

The going from a world we know
To one a wonder still
Is like the child's adversity
Whose vista is a hill,
Behind the hill is sorcery
And everything unknown,
But will the secret compensate
For climbing it alone? ($1603$)

By comparing the passage from this world into death to the passage of a child over the hill into the unknown, Dickinson continues the analogy of man, the child, who needs or wants the guidance of God, the Father. For Dickinson, however, God supplies no securities, neither in life nor in heaven. When God gives his guidance, as in "Far from Love the Heavenly Father," he guides not from the safety of a father's hand but from the treachery of a dragon's. In this poem, "The going from a world we know," the child walks alone, without guidance, and he heads not for the familiarity of a domestic home, but for "sorcery" and "everything unknown." Dickinson questions the security of the images of God as father and heaven as home, since all she really knows of God and heaven indicates that she can feel certain about neither one.

Prayer should appease the lonely worshipper who craves interaction with his Lord. Dickinson likes the thought of
prayer, of talking to God, but she finds prayer difficult because she perceives only God's absence: "Prayer is the little implement/ Through which Men reach/ Where Presence--is denied them." (#437). For Dickinson, men constantly try to connect with God, but men find only absence. Yet that absence does spur them on to prayer, so Dickinson's doubts do not entirely suggest disbelief or a feeling of futility in religion. In "My period had come for Prayer--" (#564), the persona feels a need to speak to God, and she realizes that she must reach up to meet him because He exists in the unknown: "God grows above--so those who pray/ Horizons--must ascend." Upon ascending, she cannot associate domestic images or familiar physical statures with God; she finds neither a residence in his "Vast Prairies of Air" nor any face or body to comprehend Him: "Infinitude--Had'st Thou no Face/ That I might look on Thee?" Dickinson cannot accept the concept of God the Father who will lend a friendly ear to her supplications, since she has found no empirical basis to support such a theory that heaven and God resemble experiences and people that we have known on earth.

Nevertheless, Dickinson cannot disbelieve completely in the eternal; she continues herself to ascend into God's horizons to search for life beyond death. Shira Wolosky brilliantly proposes that Dickinson's religious doubts stem
from the Civil War, while her reluctance to forsake the eternal comes from fears that chaos will reign without telic time. Wolosky shows how both the North and the South in the Civil War felt that God ordained their victory in this war as part of His divine plan. The combined fervor of political nationalism and religion grew from the puritan notion that all events were emblematic of God's actions in the world. But, according to Wolosky, "rather than interpreting actual events in terms of a divine ordinance, Dickinson comes to measure the divine scheme by actual events." The contradictions caused by the Civil War undermined for Dickinson "not only a theological interpretation of political reality but the theological patterns themselves." Dickinson's conflict arises from her inability to disregard these theological patterns, because she feared "the threat of disorder, which the doubt of eternity represented."

But despite her fears, Dickinson never settles in her poetry for one answer, one system, or one set of metaphors. Her canon expands metonymically to include all possibilities. These multiple solutions do not preclude the existence of a single reality even though she tests several:

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I many times thought Peace had come
When Peace was far away--
As Wrecked Men--deem they sight the Land--
At Centre of the Sea--
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And struggle slacker--but to prove
As hopelessly as I--
How many the fictitious Shores--
Before the Harbor be--

Even though this poem speaks of the failure of finding peace, and the persona compares herself to wrecked men struggling hopelessly in the sea, the poem enacts a belief in the universe's order. In spite of many fictitious shores, a harbor exists. The hopelessness of the sea remains a reality, but so do the existence and security of land. Even the poem's perfect ballad form attests to an order that more frantic speakers cannot manage.

The final possibility of no shores, no eternal places to compensate for the hopeless struggle in the sea, however, does recur throughout Dickinson's poetry. Heaven may exist only as a state of the mind: "Heaven is so far of the Mind/That were the Mind dissolved--/The Site--of it--by Architect/ Could not again be proved" ($370). Dickinson plays with the idea that the eternal lives only in the present-- "Forever--is composed of Nows"--and that our only heaven exists here on earth--"The Fact that Earth is Heaven--" ($1408). Dickinson converts the concept of a domestic and earth-like heaven into the idea of a heavenly earth. Instead of renouncing the earth for the rewards of heaven, Dickinson creates personae who plan to build their
own rewards now: "So instead of getting to Heaven, at last--/ I'm going, all along" (#324). Within this group of poems, telic time exists only as individual speakers create their own goals.

Dickinson's speakers may doubt the consolation of finding a heavenly place, but they do not doubt the consolation of fame. Her personae express Dickinson's own hopes for the future recognition of her voice:

My Holiday, shall be
That They--remember me--
My Paradise--the fame
That They--pronounce my name-- (#431)

Accomplishment and future recognition become an individual's paradise. Dickinson's personae look forward to death to establish a name:

The Things that Death will buy
Are Room--
Escape from Circumstance--
And a Name-- (#382)

Most people work for immediate pleasure, "for Time--/ He--Compensates--immediately--," but Dickinson's personae wait for the slow compensation of fame with those who "Work for Immortality--" (#406). Dickinson may question the consolations of a domestic paradise, but she securely
believes in the power of the word:

A Word made Flesh is seldom
And tremulously partook
Nor then perhaps reported
But have I not mistook
Each one of us has tasted
With ecstasies of stealth
The very food debated
To our specific strength--
A Word that breathes distinctly
Has not the power to die
Cohesive as the Spirit
It may expire if He--
"Made Flesh and dwelt among us"
Could condescension be
Like this consent of Language
This loved Philology. (*1651)

Dickinson, through her poetic personae, quells the threat of disorder that she may fear at the thought of no eternity by creating her own order and longevity. In "A Word made Flesh," Dickinson conveys her belief in the written word's ability to live beyond death, "A Word that breathes distinctly/ Has not the power to die." She compares the written word with Christ by secularly interpreting John's language in the Bible, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." But Dickinson uses the religious connotations to heighten Philology to mystical status. Reading, then, becomes an act such as the Lord's supper of which religious devotees
"seldom/ And tremulously" partake. The real significance lies not with the readers, however, but with the writers who create the immortal words. Dickinson as poetess does not need to rely upon unproven consolations of death if she has the power, as God does, to create her own immortality.

But Dickinson stresses the necessity for secrecy in reading, the "ecstasies of stealth," as well as in writing. Possibly she believes in the necessity of stealth because of her sex. Dickinson's own secrecy about the extent and seriousness of her career validates this interpretation, particularly with the support of such poems a "Rearrange a 'Wife's' affection":

Rearrange a "Wife's" affection!  
When they dislocate my Brain!  
Amputate my freckled Bosom!  
Make me bearded like a man!  

Blush, my spirit, in thy Fastness--  
Blush, my unacknowledged clay--  
Seven years of troth have taught thee  
More than Wifehood ever may!  

Love that never leaped its socket--  
Trust entrenched in narrow pain--  
Constancy thro' fire--awarded--  
Anguish--bare of anodyne!  

Burden--borne so far triumphant--  
None suspect me of the crown,  
For I wear the "Thorns" till Sunset--  
Then--my Diadem put on.  

Big my Secret but it's bandaged--  
It will never get away  
Till the Day its Weary Keeper  
Leads it through the Grave to thee.  

(#1737)
The riddle of this poem unravels if Dickinson becomes the poem's speaker. The poem seems to refer to the secret of her poetic career. But even with this analysis, certain questions about the poem remain. In stanza one, the speaker commands emphatically for someone to radically amputate her feminine body and make her into a man. Her plea resembles Lady Macbeth's cry for the spirits to "unsex" her and strengthen her into a man. This speaker's designs, however, are not upon murder, but upon the rearrangement of "a 'wife's' affection." The necessity to rearrange this affection comes from others who "dislocate" her brain. If we understand the poem to refer to Dickinson and her poetic career, possibly she means she must redirect the "'wife's affection" or inner energy from a traditional woman's role as wife to a man's role as poet, because society dislocates her brain from functioning as both wife and poet.

The confusion of identity, since the speaker functions as a man but remains a woman, causes the shame in stanza two and the pain in stanza three. Stanza two reveals how she feels shame in her commitment to follow the commands of her interior spirit, her "unacknowledged clay," rather than her outer physical form. Yet, her "troth" to poetry has fulfilled her more than traditional marriage vows would.
(Why "seven years of troth" remains a mystery.) In stanza three, she admits that the "love," "trust," and "constancy" that women traditionally give to a man in marriage, she directs back into herself for the creation of her poetry. The division and pain caused by her denial of a socially accepted marriage for a more self-centered commitment causes pain, but also rewards out of anguish.

Stanzas four and five record the secret triumph in her accomplishment. Dickinson uses religious language in stanza four as she does in "A Word made Flesh." She connects her "burden" to the Savior's since she wears, as Christ did, a crown of "Thorns" when worthy of a "Diadem." By comparing her calvary to Christ's, Dickinson also elevates herself to the Christlike power of salvation. Just as Christ's fame and glory expanded through his death and resurrection, so, she suggests in stanza five, will her "secret" poetic accomplishment resurrect after her death and spread her fame. Dickinson, the daughter of Philology, creates her own place of immortality through the power of her voice.

Both Dickinson and Rossetti, then, look toward death for life's compensations. Their poetry records similar examinations on the nature of paradise, but their conclusions differ as much as their poetic methods do. Both women examine the possibility of heaven as an extended earth, but only Dickinson seems aware of her scrutiny.
Rossetti imagines paradise as a perfection of this world, as this world in springtime without barrenness, without loneliness, without separation, without inequality. But she remains trapped within patriarchal systems, so that her personae ultimately long for only what they could hope for on earth, love and marriage. Convention does not afford her metaphors of fulfillment for the single woman, so she imagines heaven as marriage without earth's imperfections.

Dickinson, however, cannot accept a domestic paradise, because she could not accept a domestic earth. As Rossetti does, Dickinson uses conventional and familiar metaphors, but she exchanges familiarity with questions about the systems that created those metaphors. Dickinson answers her questions only with the future hope of fame, but the act of questioning instead of accepting traditional images of home and heaven expands her poetry beyond the narrow confines of metaphor, but also painfully squeezes dry her faith. Dickinson's writing becomes symbolical, looking forward to the future symbolists whose figures of speech, which reach out of established codes to create their own systems, are metonymic instead of allegorical. Nevertheless, even though Rossetti clings to paradise and Dickinson to earth, the final hope for both women's expressed oppression, however different the reasons, is death.
Notes for Chapter 5


4Germaine Greer, "Introduction to *Goblin Market,"* pp. xi, xv.


7Theo Dombrowski, "Dualism in the Poetry of Christina Rossetti," p. 75.


12 Mossberg, *Emily Dickinson: When a Writer is a Daughter*, p. 54.


15 See especially the use of crucifixion and calvary in the following poems: #295, #313, #348, #368, #501, #527, #549, #553, #561, #577, #620, #725, #1072.
"A thorn-choked garden plot": Conclusions

Go from me, summer friends, and tarry not:
I am no summer friend, but wintry cold;
A silly sheep benighted from the fold,
A slaggard with a thorn-choked garden plot.
    --Christina Rossetti, "From Sunset to Rise Star"

Burden--borne so far triumphant--
None suspect me of the crown,
For I wear the "Thorns" till Sunset--
Then--my Diadem put on.
    --Emily Dickinson, #1737

Dickinson's and Rossetti's poetry conveys the darkness of a woman's outlook when a strong patriarchal society controls and restricts her place in that society. These two poets' views of the self, the world, and death created pictures of failure and disintegration. Yet each poet hung onto a fragment of hope that inspires her verse. Dickinson defended the woman's equal worth on earth, and Rossetti hoped for her equal worth in heaven.

Still, their poetry chronicles the renunciation of their lives—not the self-renunciation that society expected from women, but the renunciation of the feminine to earn the status of poet. Both at times renounced their female bodies—"I wish and I wish I were a man" (Rossetti, "From the Antique"); "Amputate my freckled Bosom! / Make me bearded
like a Man!" (Dickinson, #1737). Both conveyed their fears (and consequent rejection of) the self-obliteration of romantic love, as Dickinson wrote to Susan Gilbert, "it is dangerous, and it is all too dear." In their poems, personae in love fade into obsequious oblivion. Dickinson pictured the burning flowers who pine for the sun and enacted how "The Drop, that wrestles in the Sea--/ Forgets her own locality--" (#284). Likewise, Rossetti listed the different ways women remain "Ready to spend and be spent for your sake" in "Monna Inominata" and portrayed the wasted life of the Princess who stagnates waiting for the tardy Prince in "The Prince's Progress." Finally, both denied themselves the role of bearing children and described in their poetry the sparseness of the barren woman's landscape: Rossetti's "May" illustrates her landscape with "bare poplars," "lank vines," "brambles overgrown," and "chill darkness," while Dickinson's "Ourselves were wed one summer--dear--" (#631) faces her cottage toward "Oceans--and the North" and sows her garden "in Frosts."

Yet both poets actively chose to renounce the traditionally feminine roles, despite the divisions inherent in the choice: "Renunciation--is the Choosing/ Against itself--/ Itself to justify/ Unto itself" (Dickinson, #745); "I have hedged me with a thorny hedge" (Rossetti, "From Sunset to Rise Star"). The difference between the two poets
lies in each one's perception of her choice. Rossetti negatively conveyed that those who do not fit, somehow fail, while Dickinson, on the contrary, positively expressed that barren and blossoming women exist as equal "Queens" (#631). Although at times in her poetry Dickinson wished to transform her femininity, she still described it as the "Satin" of the "Deserts" or the "Gold" of "Ethiop" (#492). And Dickinson repeatedly exalted in verse her own self worth and her value as a poet: "The one who could repeat the Summer day--/ Were greater than itself" (#307). Rossetti simply lacked Dickinson's aplomb.

Their shared duplicity, however, seeps through their language. Both poets, Dickinson in particular, conveyed through pronoun gender an adversarial relationship between women and a stereotyped feminine identification with nature. The duplicity, also, between expected and actual behavior comes forth through their poetry in split or double personalities. Rossetti separated outcasts and conformists into the polar voices of "The Lowest Room," "May," "Cousin Kate," and "Goblin Market." Dickinson combined two personalities, or "Bodies," in one divided character: "Two Bodies--therefore be--/ Bind One--The other fly--" (#384). Dickinson's technique allowed her to assimilate an appearance of conformity with rebellion--"Still! Could themself have peeped--/ And seen my Brain--go round--/ They
might have lodged a Bird/ For Treason" (#613), while Rossetti felt she had to write her outcasts into conformity or leave them in eternal failure.

Duplicity from continuing interior conflict also pervades their verse in mirroring pronomial structures. The language in one woman's poetry so precisely imitates the other's language, that the authors remain indistinguishable when we examine these pronomial structures concurrently and out of context: "Myself, arch traitor to myself" (Rossetti, "Who Shall Deliver Me?") , "Myself--assault Me," "Me from Myself--to banish--" (Dickinson, #642), "But what I was I am, I am even I" (Rossetti, "The Thread of Life"), "I cannot unself myself" (Rossetti, The Face of the Deep), "Ourself behind ourself, concealed" (Dickinson, #670). These mirroring pronouns work paradoxically to both cancel and multiply identity, but either way the structures reveal an afflicted and divided conscience.

Divisions stemmed from their similar belief in the rightness of restrictions coupled with their desire for complete freedom. Both poets wrote of the protection derived from confinements and restrictions: "I wear my mask for warmth" (Rossetti, "Winter: My Secret"); "So safer--guess--with just my soul/ Upon the Window pane--" (Dickinson, #327). More often, they, particularly Rossetti, wrote how such confinements suffocate and deaden. In some
ways, Rossetti allowed confinements to control the pessimistic tone of her verse, as in "Dead for Death," "Autumn," and "From Sunset to Rise Star," because she remained unaware of how she used those restrictions to create her poetry: "Thus am I mine own prison. Everything/Around me free and sunny and at ease" (Rossetti, "The Thread of Life"). Dickinson, however, often used restrictions to explore the effect of them on her life and verse, that is, to see how boundaries and enclosures suggest imaginative questing: "Over the fence--/ Strawberries--grow--" (#251); "Doom is the House without the Door--/ . . . 'Tis varied by the Dream/ Of what they do outside" (#475).

Possibly Dickinson attuned herself more to optimistic questing beyond boundaries because of the American desire to search beyond the frontier. Henry Nash Smith suggests how the western frontier's free land and economic equality inspired writers with a sense of "a rebirth, a regeneration, a rejuvenation of man and society." Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman developed their belief in the necessity for "grim energy" and "self-reliance" from the vision of the frontier, just as Herman Melville, Thoreau, and James Fenimore Cooper exalted primitivism over the corruption of industrialization. But while the frontier possibilities for an exterior landscape sparked American male writers' imaginations, it was the frontier
possibilities within an interior landscape that inspired Dickinson.

But even Dickinson's optimism frequently disintegrated, and she joined Rossetti in the development of bleak wastelands and attitudes that match the interior suffocation of confinement. In these poems, Dickinson and Rossetti created images of despair through negative and empty metaphors:

It was not Death, for I stood up,
But, most like Chaos—Stopless—cool—
Without a Chance, or Spar—
Or even a Report of Land—
To justify—Despair. (Dickinson, \$511)

It is a land with neither night nor day
but one even plain
Stretches through long unbroken miles away,
While through the sluggish air a twilight grey Broodeth
(Rossetti, "Cobwebs")

The tension created by psychic fragmentation paradoxically formed these interior wastelands of despair.

In fact, duplicity directly affected not only the creation of each poet's art, but also her subsequent attitude toward her work. Dickinson seemed to realize and exploit how deprivation and restriction contributed to her creativity. She wrote, "Deprived of other Banquet,/ I
entertained Myself—" ($773) and "Bind me—I still can sing" ($1005). But she recognized her work as subversive and her art as potentially destructive ("My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun" [$754]; "She dealt her pretty words like Blades—" [$479]). Dickinson released her creativity when she sensed a force (society or maybe her own super-ego) that tried to bind or hinder her freedom. She illustrated this force as a goblin from which the soul must escape: "The soul has moments of Escape—/ When bursting all the doors—/ She dances like a Bomb, abroad" ($512). Dickinson controlled her own sanity with the "Bomb," "Gun," and "Blades" of her creative power: "But since we got a Bomb—/ And held it in our Bosom—/ Nay—Hold it—/it is calm—" ($443).

Rossetti, unlike Dickinson, did not actively explore her own role as an artist, but we can intuit her relationship to her work indirectly. Rossetti wrote directly only of the male artist who freezes, molds, and creates the passive female model, "Not as she is, but as she fills his dream" ("In an Artist's Studio"). The female models passively acquiesced to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's creativity. John Everett Millais records on December 4, 1851 how Elizabeth Siddal remained completely still in a bathtub of freezing water while he painted her as the drowned Ophelia:

One day, just as the picture was nearly finished, the lamps went out unnoticed by the artist, who was so
intensely absorbed in his work that he thought of nothing else, and the poor lady was kept floating in the cold water till she was quite benumbed. She herself never complained of this, but the result was that she contracted a severe cold.² (The added emphasis is mine.)

Millais discovered the extent of Siddal's discomfort and illness only when Siddal's father threatened to sue him if Millais did not pay for her doctor bills.

Since she also modeled herself as the Virgin Mary for Dante Gabriel, Rossetti empathized more with the passivity of the female models, the "Sisterhood," than with the artists of the "Brotherhood." Rossetti filled her brother's dreams as the "symbol of female excellence" in purity and virginity. He criticized her poems as "tainted" and "utterly foreign" to her "primary impulses" when she failed to live up to this dream. Rossetti's own renditions of the active and creative woman, however, do not portray creative virgins, but rather fallen women as unwed mothers ("Cousin Kate") or Duessa's who hold the power of transformation ("The World" and "Babylon the Great"). Rossetti believed as Dickinson did in the subversive and destructive quality of the feminine creative power, "Gaze not upon her for her dancing whirl/ Turns giddy the fixed gazer presently" ("Babylon the Great"). But for Rossetti, the evil interior goblin was the artist, not the force that sought to restrict the artist. Rossetti associated creations of luxury and
indulgence, whether in the world or in art, with sin.

Neither poet resolved her problems with her perceptions of religion in order to attain unburdened spiritual fulfillment. Rossetti, in such poems as "A Portrait" or "Passing Away," lost through restrictions and inhibitions her ability to praise the earth, while Dickinson, who overflowed with praise for the earth, lost (or could never fully commit herself to) a God to whom she could emit her praises. With her bitterness over earthly deprivations, Rossetti undercut her portrayals of heaven as an earthly recompense, "She...hated all for love of Jesus Christ" ("A Portrait"). Although Rossetti clung fiercely to a heaven that solved or compensated for the inequities of earth, she did so not by changing earth's systems or hierarchies, but by eliminating the possibility of outcasts who failed to fit within the systems. While her outcasts on earth fail to create a traditional family home and live instead in "a thorn-choked garden plot," Rossetti's women personae all find in heaven either Christ or a previous lover for their bridegroom and live in the eternal fruition of "Heaven's May" ("Passing Away," "A Portrait," "The Heart Knoweth Its Own Bitterness," and "Saints and Angels").

Conversely, the consolation of heaven as home frightened Dickinson since she imagined a similar loss of identity in heavenly "marriages" as she did in earthly marriages: "Fade
I unto Divinity" (#682); "I felt my life with both my hands/To see if it was there" (#351). Dickinson may have come closer than Rossetti to a recognition of her paradoxes, but such recognition prevented her from believing in divine eternity. Dickinson replaced a God, whom she perceived as an extention of patriarchal control, with herself. Art became for Dickinson her religion. She took in her own hands the responsibility for building her immortality and established herself as "Empress of Calvary" and daughter of "Philology": "A Word that breathes distinctly/Has not the power to die" (#1651); "My Paradise--the fame/That They pronounce my name" (#431). Only through a solipsistic vision could she create and rule her reality.

The need to control her reality sparked each poet's creativity, since each woman wrote because of her dissatisfactions with her place. Neither poet boldly confronted her society nor made efforts to change the system that afflicted her. Rather, a system that restricted and limited women created tensions within Rossetti and Dickinson from which their poetry emerged. Dickinson possessed and expressed a greater awareness of those tensions that controlled their verse than did Rossetti, possibly because Dickinson could afford bolder self-criticism in her private examinations than could Rossetti in her more public publications. Nevertheless, each poet recognized and sought
to escape her "thorn-choked garden plot." But while Rossetti contemplated escape only by imagining a thorn-free garden in "Heaven's May," Dickinson flauntingly manipulated the "Thorns" to crown herself, "triumphant."
Notes for Chapter 6


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