Life after death, Immortality or Eternity, however one chooses to describe the continuity of the spirit after the death of the body is an intriguing phenomenon. Not surprisingly, it fascinated Emily Dickinson, who regarded it as a flood-subject of her poetry. She asserted her belief in immortality in a letter she wrote to T.W. Higginson on the 25th April 1862: "When a little Girl, I had a friend who taught me Immortality —" In her poems, she described immortality as a 'shapeless friend' in the chamber of her mind and as a third "presence" accompanying her on her journey with death. But when actually confronted with the death of her loved ones, Emily Dickinson suffered anguish and wondered where the departed had gone. Personal faith was not enough to provide satisfactory answers. On the death of the Rev. Charles Wadsworth, she exclaimed, "Lives he in any other world/My faith cannot reply" (#1557). On the death of her mother, she cried "We dont know where she is, though so many tell us". In one of her new poems discovered by William Shurr, she has written, "To still have her, but tears forbid me/My own is in the Grave." When a friend James Clark died,
she questioned, "Are you certain there is another life? ..." The uncertainty, doubt and pain in her voice is a far cry from the confident voice of the poet. The poet in her has no doubt about the certainty of her going to Heaven or about the state of post-mortal life. Judith Farr, in the introduction of *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays* writes that Dickinson's "great preoccupation is not love, not death, but the question of eternal life, of consciousness beyond the grave."

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

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

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

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

The difference between mortality and immortality is a mere shift in space, like the different floors of the same structure. In just four lines, the poet conveys the concept of burial through the imagery of the 'bark' which might 'sink' to 'another sea'. Immortality being the 'ground-floor' is, in fact, the support base, without which there can be no life in the perceivable surface of the sea. The speaker of the poem "Conscious am I in my Chamber" (#679) attests to the presence of 'a shapeless friend' in the "chamber" of her mind whom she identifies as 'Immortality'. Neither by 'posture' nor by 'word' does this 'friend' assert himself but by 'Presence' only. The speaker, however, refers to it in the masculine gender. Immortality is the very essence of being in the Dickinson canon.
Dickinson’s immortal soul does not necessarily go to heaven. Life after death is more of a continued consciousness, a concept also subscribed to by Christina Rossetti in some of her poems. In one of Dickinson’s masterpieces, "I heard a fly buzz when I died", the speaker is a dead person narrating the final moment of her death:

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

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

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

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

Christina Rossetti has a similar poem in which the narrator describes the scene after her death. The poem "After Death" is a sequence to the poem "A Pause", although chronologically, it was written prior to it. In "A Pause" the
narrator lies dying, waiting for her beloved to come to her. In "After Death", the beloved arrives, but he is too late. The narrator is already dead. But like Dickinson's speaker, she is aware of the things in the room:

    The curtains were half-drawn, the
    floor was swept
    And strewn with rushes, rosemary
    and may
    Lay thick upon the bed on which
    I lay.

The shroud is overstrewn with flowers. But underneath the covering, the narrator sees and hears everything. She can see and hear the beloved as he comes into the room to pay his respect. The faculties of sight and hearing are more powerful it appears, after death than when she was alive:

    He leaned above me, thinking that
    I slept
    And could not hear him; but I
    heard him say,
    'Poor child, poor child', and as
    he turned away
    Came a deep silence, and I knew he
    wept.

The narrator has experienced physical death, but her consciousness is still alive and intact. She can even still feel joy in the knowledge that the beloved is still alive and warm even as she herself is lying dead. The poet-persona of this poem and "I heard a fly buzz when I died" gives one the impression that the spirit, after death, does not leave the body but continues to be in it. In both cases, they identify themselves as the dead persons, and both acknowledged their
One of Dickinson’s best known poems, "Because I could not stop for Death" describes the journey from this life to that of beyond. Death, in the guise of a courteous gentlemen comes to call on the persona and takes her for a ride in his carriage. The carriage, with its third presence, identified as "Immortality" heads towards eternity. This makes it clear that the soul or spirit is infinite and death can claim only the body which is finite.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The ghost may not/cannot report about life in the grave, but he assures his wife that life is good where he is. He has come out of the grave temporarily because of his wife, who weeps with grief at home. The rhetoric of ambivalence is operational here. The ghost cannot reveal his new life inside the grave as that would put the poet's credibility at stake. She might create a ghost who returns from the grave, but she
is not in a position to reveal for a fact what is yet beyond human knowledge. Whatever the ghost say about the life inside the grave would be taken as the truth by both his wife and the readers. And the poet cannot risk this. Instead, what the ghost indeed reveal is actually the living's expectations and hopes of what life after death might be:

Tender hand hath made our nest;  
Our fear is ended, our hope is blended  
With present pleasure, and we have rest.

In the poem, "The Grave my little Cottage is" #1743, Dickinson's speaker is again a dead woman who describes the grave as her "little cottage", where she keeps her "parlour" ready for her beloved when the two of them will be reunited for an everlasting life.

The grave my little cottage is,  
Where "keeping house" for thee  
I make my parlour orderly  
And lay the marble tea.

The imagery of this poem depicts the dead as not merely reposing in the grave, but engaged in house-keeping like ordinary folks. The only difference between this life and the world of the grave is the 'marble tea'. This picture is again ambivalent from the one that Rossetti imagines the grave to be. In a poem called "What Good shall my Life do me?", Rossetti answers the question she asks in the first line, "Have dead men long to wait? -
There is a certain term
For their bodies to the worm
And their souls at heaven gate:
Dust to dust, clod to clod
These precious things of God,
Trampled underfoot by man
And beast the appointed years -

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

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

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

The rhetoric of this poem is full of ambivalence as the poet
gives a series of reasons to doubt her premise. Scholars and
wisemen are unable to give satisfactory explanation about
this order of reality because it is "beyond" this world.
Neither can conventional belief provide a convincing answer.
Philosophy, sagacity and even theology have only proved their
inadequacy. But despite their failure to explain or prove
this existence beyond earthly life, the reality of it is as
'positive as sound' though as "invisible as music". The hope
and belief in it is right there in the soul: "Narcotics cannot still the Tooth/That nibbles at the soul -". No drug is strong enough to make the soul forget that 'this world is not conclusion' nor is it the end of life. In spite of the inconclusive answer provided by human learning, the soul is aware that the death of the corporeal body is not the end of itself.

So far, the trend has been to read this poem as a negative poem. This has been possible due to the ambivalence of the rhetoric. Daniel Orsini in "Emily Dickinson and the Romantic use of Science" has observed that the poem never proves the narrator's thesis. Cynthia G. Wolff also observes that this poem "examines the leakage and finally the loss of faith." Paul Ferlazzo too, interprets the poem in a similar vein, and comments that "Dickinson seems to be suggesting .... none of our intellectual or spiritual institutions offer, upon closer inspection, a lasting peace of soul". He challenges that "rousing sermons and loud hymns" may drug the senses into submission but they cannot ease the pain of gnawing doubt in her [Dickinson's] soul. These charges may however be refuted by pointing out the fact that the poet is aware that no branch of learning is equipped to explain Infinity in concrete terms. Only the soul, itself immortal, feels "a nibbling" which no drug may stupefy. The poet has declared not only the reality of Infinity, but also
the fact that the wisdom of this world, which is finite, cannot fully comprehend what is beyond itself. These critics are right in pointing out the inadequacy of dogmatic religion to prove that this world is not conclusion. But what they have all failed to point out is that the poet relies on the ".... Tooth/that nibbles at the soul", to prove her posit at the start of the poem. The poem, however, goes no further than stating the fact of immortality. It makes no statement or speculation as to 'where' or how the 'species' might live except for the fact that it is "beyond" this world. There is no proof save the innate knowledge that death is not the "conclusion" or end of the soul's existence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

If it were not for the usual Dickinsonian 'dashes', this poem with its quiet dignity and hopeful anticipation could have been one of Christina Rossetti's devotional poems. The poet depicts the dead to be in a 'perfecter' place where there is joy and gladness beyond the imagination of the living. The rhetoric does not go beyond credibility. Less definitely is more, as by not venturing to describe the measure of 'Delight', instead saying that it is 'beyond our faint conjecture' and 'estimate', the poet conveys the sense of indescribable joy. The dead are also 'blesseder' than 'we' who are still living because they have received and known what we still hope and pray for. They know the now while we know the old. These happy blessed souls do not return to earth where, once dead, they are relegated to the status of 'fictitious people', to give an account of their lives beyond this world. It is 'us' who 'trust' that they are not only sublimely happy, but that they also remember and wait for us
to join them. They are already 'home' and thinking of the living as being still in 'exile'. The dividing wall or barrier between life on earth and the new world is 'death' which the poet describes as a 'miracle'. It is the gateway that marks the passage from 'exile' to 'home'. However, the whole structure of life after death rests on the pivotal phrase "we trust". It is the key phrase in the poem, which supports and holds it together. The word 'trust' carries a more profound weight than 'belief' and the poet's choice to use it endows the poem with a sense of religiosity, even with the absence of words like 'Heaven' or 'God'. Envisioning a better and happier state of existence for the dead brings hope and encouragement to the living. Even death is viewed without bitterness, but rather as a doorway to our permanent 'home'. There is no sense of morbidity at the mention of death at the end of the poem. With its lack of the usual Dickinsonian flippancy and irreverence colouring even the religious poems, this poem is perhaps the closest that Dickinson comes to professing the Christian theme of faith. The unnamed "places perfecter" where life is "blesseder" can be easily transcribed as Heaven or Paradise. The speaker, using words such as 'we', 'our' and 'ourselves' is a representative of all believers.

Dickinson's rhetoric on post-mortal state is full of ambivalence. For example, in "Heaven is so far of the Mind"
(#370), she declares that Heaven is an idea that exists only in the mind and has therefore no reality:

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

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

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

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

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

There is a morn by men unseen -
Whose maids upon remoter green
Keep their seraphic may
And all day long, with dance and game.
And gambol I may never name -
Employ their holiday.
This poem is reminiscent of the poem "The Echoing Green" from the *Songs of Innocence* by William Blake. The first stanza of the poem is quoted below:

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

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

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

In these lines, Dickinson weaves a web of magic whose delight and frolic, transport readers into the enchanted world of faery. Notwithstanding its arcadian nature and setting; Dickinson's "remoter green" is no ordinary countryside. It is
a "mystic green" as yet "unseen" by human eyes. It is "wondrous" as well as "serene". The poet-persona's desire is to be transported to this 'dell', so that she too may be with the frolicsome people. But she can go there only after her life on this earth is over. Only then will the far, distant bells ring to 'announce' her coming. The poet-persona is as confident of the existence of this Eden as she is of going there herself someday:

Dickinson's use of the term 'men' in this poem is generic and its denotes all human beings to whom the reality of the poet's vision is still denied. It does not stand for the male sex alone as it has been alleged by some critics and scholars. Aliki Barnstone, for example, says that Dickinson has created a uni-sex heaven motivated by the idea of freedom, since "men" represent lack of freedom.16 Amy L. Cherry says that "the speaker (poet) is safe whilst among women and can even reach spirituality thru this chaste sensuality."17 But while describing the light-hearted activities of the maids, the poet in no way denies the presence of the menfolk. In the last stanza, she addresses the "People of the mystic green", which is a proof by itself that the inhabitants are not single sexed as has been commonly interpreted. By popular understanding, 'People' denotes a collection of men and women. Death being universal, it is unreasonable to think that the poet has imagined a
heaven exclusively for women. The poet also does not imagine a heaven where there will be no division of the sexes. Her 'remoter green' is not the conventional idea of Heaven nor is it too other-worldly. The locale could easily have been "Tempe or the vales of Arcady". The first and the last line of the poem describe this Eden in terms of 'morn' and 'dawn', signifying a new beginning to which the soul awakens after the sleep of death. There is an implied paganism in this particular description of post-mortal ecstasy, as if one might encounter satyrs frisking amid the dancing feet. The poet, without any mention of pagan gods creates an atmosphere usually associated with myths, just as she endowed "Those fair fictitious people" with an air of Christian hope and faith.

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

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

The poet, to borrow the words of Carton in The Rhetoric of American Romance (1985), "Somewhat domesticates the mysterious" and "also mystifies the oppressively common-
place" through associating Paradise with the exceedingly common. The speaker knows that one day, when she 'dies', she too will go to Paradise. She wonders if this place will be pleasant or if she might get homesick for this earth. This fear of being homesick, perhaps for this "curious earth" lay in contrast with the earlier expressed desire to be with the 'people of the mystic green'.

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

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

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

The speaker is obviously one who is acquainted with suffering and anguish. She is one who is mature enough to be resigned to whatever Fate gives her. In "Emily Dickinson and the Disappearance of God", Vincent Anderson notes that Dickinson has made an important point in this poem; that "at the heart of her own and Christ’s experience", there is "suffering and anguish" which binds the two together. Looking at Christ’s suffering will make her forget her own ‘Anguish’ which is a mere ‘drop’ by comparison with His. But this will only happen when "Time" is over and she loses all her desire to ‘know’. Her interest by then, would have shifted from her own suffering to Christ’s. The satirical description of heaven as a "schoolroom" has no impact on the general mood of the poem. Cristanne Miller, in Emily Dickinson: A Poet’s Grammar (1987)
says that Dickinson’s speaker "proves herself more generous than Christ both in her willingness to accept His refusal to care for her and in her anticipated empathy at His "woe", despite His apparent indifference to her’s." This is true, since the speaker bears no grudge against Christ for the delayed explanation. The pain and anguish of the moment would lose their acuteness and serve only to recognise His woe. The speaker is almost humble in her unquestioning acceptance of her present suffering, which, she hopes, she will forget in the presence of Christ. She anticipates Heaven as a place where she will learn about things she is, in this life, ignorant of. But she is also astute enough to foresee that it would not matter to her anymore. Heaven is represented as a place where earthly sufferings will be forgotten, where there will be no mysteries because Christ will explain, answer and reveal all that is denied and hidden in life. This idea of Heaven as a "Schoolroom of the Sky" with Christ as the Teacher is satirical in spirit but serious of tone. This itself is ambivalent. It is not the aim of the poet, here, to ridicule Christ, but the unusual seriousness of tone is somewhat spoilt by her description of Heaven. When the speaker gets to Heaven finally, it will be to realise that answers to questions asked on earth are not important anymore. Her being’s attention will be focussed wholly on Christ. The rhetoric of the poem indirectly hints at human
self-centredness that obstructs one’s relationship with Christ. It is only after death, when the soul reaches Heaven that it will fully comprehend the depth of Christ’s sacrifice.

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

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

This poem is another example of the poet’s ambivalence about eternity. In a mockingly playful tone, the speaker reveals, perhaps, Dickinson’s own impatience over the propriety and sobriety of the New England Sunday School. An eternity of such a Sunday without ‘recess’ would be intolerable to her.
The poet draws on the conventional concept of Heaven as the soul's destination after death. But the speaker's reaction is not at all conventional. On the contrary, it is almost anti-religion. Instead of the usual anticipation of joy and blessedness, the speaker is afraid she is going to find God's presence in Heaven irksome and tedious. The rhetoric of ambivalence is found from the very start of the poem. The speaker "never felt at home-below", meaning on earth; she declares, almost in the same breath, that she will not feel at home in Heaven either. She says that Heaven would be tolerable if only God's 'perennial' presence could be removed for a little while. If possible, she would even prefer to run away than spending an eternity in God's presence:

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

The poet-persona takes it for granted that going to Heaven is an inevitable prospect irrespective of whether one is saved or not. Dickinson knew the pre-condition for going to Heaven according to the Christian belief: she had been the only one who resisted conversion during her stay at the Mount Holyoke female seminary. Yet the poem makes no mention of the prerequisite for religious conversion. This is because, the poet imagines Heaven not from the point of view of a 'Ransomed soul' but from the point of view of that youthful reprobate who stuck to her guns by remaining unconverted and "standing
alone in her rebellion and growing very careless". The image of Paradise in this poem is synonymous with the Church Dickinson rejected all her life. The poem also proves her acceptance of dogmatic faith even if she does not believe in it personally. Her mention of Holy Ghost in such an irreverential manner may be considered blasphemous by the orthodox reader. The orthodox reader might even be tempted to argue that with her particular frame of mind, it is doubtful the speaker will ever be allowed entry into Paradise. She probably knew this herself as she says she will "not feel at home" in the "Handsome skies". The speaker's attitude towards Paradise is not the same as in "I shall know why when Time is Over", proving once again the poet's ambivalence of ideas. In fact, in another poem, the speaker is not very sure if there is a heaven, much less the possibility of her going there. She uses her reasoning that since

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

This poem rules out the possibility of going to Heaven for ordinary men and women, including the poet-persona. If there is a Heaven at all, then it will be for the 'Saints' only. The belief that there must be a Heaven is not based on any religious conviction on the part of the poet-persona, but rather on a logical inference.
The poem that best illustrate the poet's ambivalence is the poem "Going to Heaven" (#79), where the speaker affirms both the idea of going to Heaven and her unbelief of the very same idea:

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

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

While Dickinson does not believe in going to Heaven in "Going to Heaven", in another poem, "Where Bells no More Affright the Morn" (#112), the persona displays a distinct impatience for reaching Heaven:
Where tired Children placid sleep
Thro' Centuries of Noon
This place is Bliss - this town is Heaven -
Please, Pater, pretty soon!

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

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

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

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

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

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

(p.271)
and

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

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

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

Life on earth is temporary and the poet seeks to emphasize
this through the imagery of the swallow, a migratory bird.
Alluding to the Old Testament times, she advocates living in
Tabernacles instead of houses, to ensure easy mobility. The
idea behind this suggestion is to make men realise that they are not permanent on earth but that their real home is in Heaven. Part of the poet’s prayer is that men should not ‘hoard’ or ‘revel’ on earth, less they should forget the real treasures laid up for them “beyond the fading splendour of the west”. This world is equated with ‘flesh’ or ‘devil’ which consists of ‘deathstruck life’ and deathlier evil’. Beyond it are the ‘everlasting hills’ where there will be ‘zest’ and ‘treasure’.

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

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

(187)

The poet derives this image of the new Jerusalem from the Book of Revelation in the Bible, complete with the sea of glass and streets of virgin gold. It is a heaven where homes
are safe, where one can sleep peaceful dreamless sleep. The sea is never 'tempest-tost' in this fair Jerusalem, because it is built on the bosom of the Savior, embodied by the Rock and the Vine.

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

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

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

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

Just as 'Paradise', 'Heaven' and 'Eden' are synonymous in Dickinson's poetry, so also are 'Jerusalem' 'Heaven' and
‘Paradise’ synonymous in Rossetti’s. The New Jerusalem or Paradise is prepared for “myriads of earth’s myriads’ who will meet again after being parted on earth, for these would be

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

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

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

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

and

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

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

Rossetti’s rhetoric on life after death is not entirely free from ambivalence while it is not as varied as Dickinson’s. There are two major movements in the poems concerning after-life. One is the expectation of transmundane ecstasy, a Heaven for the Chosen, based on Christian theology. This finds expression in the devotional poems discussed above. With vivid imagination, the poet sees
Refreshing green for heart and eyes
The golden streets and gateways pearled
The trees of Paradise.

The 'New Heavens' that awaits one after death is a land where
There shall be no more blight nor need
No barrier of the sea.
No sun and moon alternating
For God shall be the light thereof
No sorrow more, no death no sting
For God who reigns in Love. (197)

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

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

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

The ghost tells the bride:

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

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

Lean on me, hide thine eyes.
Only ourselves, earth and skies
Are present here: be wise
He urges her to quieten, to "cease" her dreams and terrors. But though sight unseen and unheard, the ghost will not let go of her, determined as he is to drag her with him back to wherever he has come from. Even the grave seems decidedly safer and familiar as compared to the total gravity-defying chaos described by the ghost.

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

The ghost, golden hair hanging below her knees looks macabre with her dew-drenched white face. With a voice "as hollow as the hollow sea" she tells her friend,
From the other world I come back to you
My locks are uncurled with dripping drenching dew
You know the old whilst I know the new.
But tomorrow you shall know this too. (p.360)

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

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

Unlike the poor ghost, her friend realises that Death alters love and friendship. His love for her had been 'for life' and death is beyond life. To those who are living, a deceased person who reappears takes on a new identity of a 'ghost',
which is an altogether offensive and unwelcome entity. The poor ghost means well, but her friend who is not yet ready to leave life behind bids her return to the grave. Life and death cannot co-exist. The poor ghost has no alternative but to go back to the world of the dead:

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

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

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

The rhetoric of this poem draws a different picture of the dead from the one Rossetti has about 'dust to dust, clod to clod' period of waiting in the grave.
In the poem "The Ghost's Petition", Rossetti again depicts the dead as living in the grave. A husband’s ghost comes visiting his wife, who weeps and moans with sorrow. The wife is happy to see her husband once again, but she "quakes to see" him. She can feel the chill of the grave clinging to him. The ghost tells his wife that her grieving disturbs his rest and sleep. Otherwise, he says, life is good for them in the "underground, /In the dark hollow."

The only factor that stands in the way of complete rest and sleep is the sound of his wife’s weeping, which reaches even the grave:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I could rest if you would not moan} \\
\text{Hour after hour; I have no power} \\
\text{To shut my ears where I lie alone.}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I could rest if you would not cry} \\
\text{but there's no sleeping while you sit weeping} \\
\text{Watching, weeping so bitterly.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(364)

A situation concerning deceased people and their relationship with the living is created by Jean Paul Satre in the play No Exit. The characters Garcin, Inez and Estelle are in Hell, but they can see and hear the people they have left behind on earth. But unlike Rossetti’s ghosts, these three characters find no exit from the room they are assigned. At first, feeling that the word ‘dead’ was too crude and terrible, they agreed to call themselves ‘absentees’. They reasoned that they are only absent from the world which is not too far from their thoughts. Just as in Rossetti’s poem, the wife’s
thoughts and grief bring the ghost up from the grave, so also these three see and hear the living talking about them. Estelle even plaintively cry out to her friend Peter who is still on earth, that as long as he thinks of her, she feels that only half of her is in Hell, while the other half is still on earth. But once the living stop remembering them to go on with their lives, the three lose their connection with the world. They are forced to accept that they are truly dead. While Satre’s characters are accommodated in a drawing room with "Second Empire" furniture, Rossetti’s ghosts rest in the grave, which Dickinson in her famous poem "Because I could not stop for Death" has described as

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Do people moulder equally
They bury in the grave?
I do believe a species
As positively live.
As I who testify it
Deny that I - am dead -
And fill my lungs for witness -
From Tanks - above my Head -

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

All the ghosts she describes, with the exception of one are shown to be living in the graves. From what meagre account of the grave they impart, there is no suffering or torment there. On the contrary, they know the new order after passing the old. The only reason two of the ghosts ("The Poor Ghost" and "The Ghost's Petition") give for not being able to rest in their graves are the sound of their loved ones weeping and sobbing on earth. The interim period between
death and going to Heaven (The poor ghost says she will sleep
till Judgement Day) is neither Limbo nor Purgatory. In fact,
in the poems that feature ghosts, there are no Heaven nor
Hell. The ghosts simply exist in the grave which apparently
is their home. This is totally contrasted with the idea that
once a person dies, the soul leaves the body to go to its
Heavenly abode. Rossetti does not send her dead to Heaven,
nor does she create an alternative paradise for them the way
Dickinson does in "There is a Morn by Men Unseen". The only
Heaven Rossetti believes in, is the Biblical Heaven. When
Rossetti contemplates life after death in relation to
herself, it is always with the hope and belief that she will
be with the saints in Heaven. Herein lies her ambivalence.
She never imagines herself, after death, to be sleeping in
the grave or to come out from the grave at night with blank-
eyed face and shadowless hair. Neither does she imagine
herself lingering, unseen and forgotten among people she left
behind. It is as if she has a double standard by which she
measured herself and others. She may ask for "the lowest
place" in Heaven in all modesty and humility, but even that
"lowest place" is denied the ghosts by her.

Rather like the speaker in "Because I could not Stop
for Death", the speaker in Rossetti’s poem "At Home" is a
deceased person, who returns to the ‘much frequented house’
to see her friends who are still living there:
When I was dead my spirit turned
To seek the much frequented house
I passed the door, and saw my friends
Feasting beneath green orange-boughs.

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

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

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

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

This poem is at odds with Emily Dickinson’s poem "Death leaves us Homesick" (#935), in which the poet declares that even though the dead do not remember anymore, the living
continue to love them all the same. Rossetti's narrator, however, is forgotten by her friends.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Far far away, it flew, far out of sight, - From earth and flowers of earth it passed away. As though it flew straight up into the light. (299)
In this sonnet, the soul is depicted as flying free from the body after death. These will be no more night or darkness for the soul.

Christina Rossetti's ambivalence on life after death is only as far as poetic creation is concerned. Her belief in the Bible gives her the vision of the new Jerusalem where blessed souls will be gathered home. As a believer, her poems echo not just her faith but also her doubts fears and prayers. She sees heaven as the real home of the soul after death. But the expression in the poems provides the ambivalence. For Christina Rossetti suffered from a sense of her own unworthiness regardless of her piety. The poems about ghosts do not in any way affect the sincerity of the devotional poems. Her personal belief in the Christian Heaven do not stand in the way of her creation of ghosts to whom T.W. Higginson's description of Emily Dickinson's poetry may be applied - "... with rain, dew and earth still clinging ...". These ghosts come out from their graves at night, only to go back at dawn. As Stephen Gurney sees it, they are the backward glances which the poet cast towards earthly pleasures. Her contemplation and anticipation of post-mortal bliss are often disturbed by nostalgic longings and remembered sentiments. These yearnings which rear their heads in the secret chamber of her heart are "transformed" into the ghosts who make their appearance only at night, to
disappear again during the day. More than likely, the 'ghost' poems have their roots in the poet's childhood readings of horror novels. Georgina Battiscombe has mentioned in her biography of the poet that Christina took to reading "the blood-curdling romances of Mrs. Radcliffe, 'Monk' Lewis and Maturrin and that all the Rossetti children had a "craze for the horrific."" Dickinson's description of the 'only ghost' she 'ever saw' is by contrast almost fragile and deceptive. He is not macabre but almost attractive like a good fairy. His 'gait' is 'soundless'; his 'conversation - seldom' and his "laughter, like the Breeze -/That dies away in Dimples/Among the pensive Trees".

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

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

Mostly, her persona does not regard Heaven as an ideal place to be. Heaven as Dickinson describes is not the Biblical Heaven and certainly not the Heaven that Rossetti covets. It is parochial, a small town at best, inhabited by a few. It has no splendour, glory or joy. The poet-persona feels no sense of unworthiness for this Heaven. Of course, in a number
of poems, the poet describe a continuity of existence after
death. But ambivalently, Judith Farr writes that the 'driving
question of Emily Dickinson's life was the one she apparently
directed to the Rev. Washington Gladden: "Is Immortality
True?" This may be a personal doubt like Rossetti's
personal belief, but like Rossetti, it did not, apparently
stand in the way of poetic composition. No one poem can be
regarded as the expression of her real self, while all the
poems should be read as expressions of the poetic self.
END NOTES


2. Ibid.


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18. John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn".


23. Stephen Gurney, Private Correspondence with this Scholar.

24. Leder and Abbott, *The Language of Exclusion*, p. 120.


26. Stephen Gurney, Private Correspondence.
