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**Abstract:**

When critics write of ‘truth to nature’ in Pre-Raphaelite poetry and painting, they rarely refer specifically to Rossetti. While his paintings situate women in medievalized environments saturated with floral imagery, nature itself seems relegated to an aesthetic function. This trope seems to be continued in his ballads in *Poems*, where the natural world is allied to the female figure can be read as directly relating to the beauty of the woman. This essay will argue for a more complex and nuanced relationship between the poet and his poetic figures.

Rossetti wrote of his concern that his poems should be free of ‘painter’s tendencies’,[[1]](#footnote-1) and though the parallels between his paintings and his poems have been explored thoroughly, I shall argue that there is a disjunction when it comes to the depiction of the natural world, which serves a different, less aesthetic and more intricate function in many of the poems. This approach is best traced in ‘The House of Life’ sonnets, where the relationship between the speaker’s emotions, depicted through a series of environmental metaphors, and the concepts with which he struggles is one which can be unpicked by exploring his changing approach to nature.

**Keywords:**

Nature, Environment, Poetry, Pre-Raphaelite, Women, Landscape, Rossetti

**‘The very sky and sea-line of her soul’: Nature, destruction and desire in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *Poems***

Ruskin’s call to artists to imbue their work with ‘truth to nature’ is often quoted as illuminating the nature imagery in Pre-Raphaelite painting, which offers a near-photographic realism juxtaposed with a medieval-Victorian symbolism. William Michael Rossetti described Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s paintings of the 1860s as ‘beautiful women with floral adjuncts’, a concept which has coloured perceptions of Rossetti’s foliage and scenery since, and this over-simplification could be read as equally relevant to some of Rossetti’s poems (W. M. Rossetti I.203). Where his paintings situate women in medievalised environments saturated with floral imagery, nature itself can appear to be relegated to an aesthetic function. This trope seems to be continued in his ballads in *Poems*, such as ‘Sister Helen’ and ‘Stratton Water’, as well as the dual work ‘The Blessed Damozel’, in which nature is heavily aestheticised. In these, the natural world allied to the female figure can be read as directly relating to the beauty of the woman, in different instances indicating innocence or decadence, for example. However, this essay will argue for a more complex and nuanced relationship between the poet and his poetic figuring of the environment, manifested in *Poems*. Rossetti himself wrote of his concern that his poems should be free of ‘painter’s tendencies’ (Fredeman IV.413), and though the parallels between his paintings and his poems have been explored thoroughly, I suggest that there is a disjunction when it comes to the depiction of the natural world in his poems, where it serves a different, less aesthetic and more intricate cultural and philosophical function.

Though Walter Pater writes in his *Appreciations* of Rossetti that his ‘lovely little sceneries’ are those ‘of a painter concentrated upon the picturesque effect’, I will argue that there are more profound approaches at work in his poetic imagery of the natural world (234). Nature is not only flowers, landscape and weather; it also includes time and death, and it is to these greater abstract concepts that the aesthetic symbols of nature refer. Yet ‘nature’, in its environmental sense, is not obviously a concept Rossetti engaged with closely in his painting. As Allen Staley points out, while for some Pre-Raphaelite painters their early explorations of the natural world in painting ‘led to much more ambitious treatment of nature’ in their later works (103), for Rossetti this trajectory was almost reversed: often stylised and featuring only glimpses of landscape (such as in *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1848-9)), his attempts to paint *en plein air* were characterised by ‘a mortal quarrel with some particular leaf’ (Hunt I.84); consequently his engagement with painting the natural world is frequently for background only, with less of the photographic detail employed by Hunt and Millais. Staley adds that ‘Nature never ceased to bother Rossetti, and after *Found*, he abandoned all attempts at naturalism.’ (105) Yet the weight of symbolism in the natural imagery used by Rossetti retains its power, and is, I will argue, all the more significant in his poetry, where the words do more than paint a picture: while Rossetti may have struggled to replicate the natural environment, his engagement with it remains profound and nuanced.

Rossetti’s poem ‘Jenny’, published in *Poems* in 1870 though written rather earlier, offers an analysis of womanhood from a masculine perspective, considering the fallen woman, Jenny, and the speaker’s ‘cousin Nell’. (line 185) Though Jenny is tainted by selling her body, her appearance in the early part of the poem is described using natural imagery: her ‘eyes are as blue skies’ (10) and she is a ‘Fresh flower, scarcely touched with signs that tell/ Of Love’s exuberant hotbed’ (12-13). Her beauty is a natural phenomenon, which cannot change. Metaphorically and culturally, however, the narrator tells a different story; inwardly, she is a ‘Poor flower left torn’ (13), a ‘Poor handful of bright spring-water’ (15). In the figure of Jenny, the natural world meets the human, and it is not a positive union, yet the speaker turns it to good in the only way he can, bringing nature and the human world together in an uncomfortable union: the ‘wealth of loosened hair’ (47) of the early part of the poem materialises literally, as he lays coins in her hair so that she can, on waking, ‘shake/My gold, in rising, from your hair,/A Danaë for a moment there.’ (73-6) The woman is described as a flower who personifies innocence despoiled, constructing an analogy between the seduced woman and the damaged, contaminated world. To be moral and well-intentioned is of no use, as campaigners were beginning to see, if the environment in which one lives is contaminated and contaminating. As Lord Shaftesbury wrote, ‘It is to no purpose […] to visit from house to house and carry with you the precepts and the lessons of the Gospel, so long as you leave the people in this squalid, obscene, filthy, disgusting, and overcrowded state.’(*The Labourer’s Friend*, July 1853, 100, qtd. Wohl 7). Material pollution leads to spiritual, moral and cultural contamination, as ‘Jenny’ demonstrates.

Lise Rodgers has considered how the symbolic flower of the poem, associated with the body of the woman and representing the material or sensual, provides a contrast with narrator’s symbolic book, indicating rationality. Rodgers argues that the poem enacts a situation in which ‘the sensual, as opposed to the rational, is more conducive to compassion’, and is also ‘the most “natural” state of man, the most preferable, and above all, the *most moral*’ (157). The emblem of the flower also provides a way of linking the material and the metaphysical, and the conclusion here is that ‘innocence and sensuality are the same thing’ (160), a line of argument both illuminating and complex in the light of nineteenth-century associations of the female with nature. In ‘Of Queen’s Gardens’, in *Sesame and Lilies* (1864), Ruskin writes of the woman as entirely instinctive and innately domestic. Her role is dignified, sheltered, and queenly, and yet she is also appealingly associated with nature:

And wherever a true wife comes, this home is always round her. The stars only may be over her head; the glowworm in the night-cold grass may be the only fire at her foot: but home is yet wherever she is. (78)

There are unstudied, natural qualities here which ally a woman with the natural environment, and emphasise biological function: a woman is domestic, maternal, because she is designed by God for motherhood. Psychological thought of the time emphasised this: women were a product of their biology, and their health was ruled by the behaviour of the reproductive organs. In ‘Jenny’, the woman despoiled by men is equated with the environment which is contaminated by manufacture and industry; mankind (the gendered term is intentional here) takes what it needs to fulfil its desires, whatever the cost to the natural world. As William Morris argued in ‘The Lesser Arts’ (1877):

Is money to be gathered? Cut down the pleasant trees among the houses, pull down ancient and venerable buildings for the money that a few square yards of London dirt will fetch; blacken rivers, hide the sun and poison the air with smoke and worse, and it’s nobody’s business to see to it or mend it: that is all that modern commerce, the counting-house forgetful of the workshop, will do for us herein. (252)

That ‘commerce’ may be extended to the relationship between men and women, particularly the transactional one in which Rossetti’s speaker finds himself with Jenny, whose body and soul are similarly besmirched by the encounter. Consequently, it appears that rather than the environment being deployed as an ornamental backdrop or as a reflection of human life and emotion, nature and humankind are paralleled: the clear implication is that both are at risk, and from the same source, the careless treatment of men.

In Pater’s intricate essay on Rossetti’s poetry, he praises the poems as expressing ‘sincerity’ with ‘the most direct and unconventional expression’, particularly focusing on ‘The Blessed Damozel’, noting that the poem retains ‘a definiteness of sensible imagery…in the midst of profoundly mystic vision’ (87-8). There are some notable parallels between Pater’s description of Rossetti’s poetry and its attributes, and Wordsworth’s *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (1802), particularly in Pater’s assertion that Rossetti uses ‘the most direct and unconventional expression’ (87), echoing Wordsworth’s defence of ‘language near to the real language of men’ (Wordsworth ‘Preface’ 84). To extend this parallel, one can also see how Rossetti uses imagery which recalls not only ‘real’ emotions, but does so using tangible natural imagery; in ‘The Blessed Damozel’, for example, we see her hair ‘yellow like ripe corn’ (12) and ‘The void, as low as where this earth/ Spins like a fretful midge.’ (35-6) Pater identifies this naturalness of imagery and revels in it, writing of ‘The Stream’s Secret’: ‘what a delight in all the natural beauty of water, all its details for the eye of a painter’ (89), yet he also inquires ‘what lies below the water’ and suggests that these ‘artifices’ are redeemed by ‘a serious purpose’ (90). There is an obvious inconsistency in Pater’s argument: that the directness and sincerity of Rossetti’s writing, depicting the natural world with ‘the eye of a painter’, is simply another form of ‘artifice’, and that rather than representing something *as it is*, instead indicates something else, something human-made and non-natural. More explicitly, Pater continues by reading nature in Rossetti’s poetry as an aesthetic device which magnifies and reflects human emotion, positing that ‘this sense of lifeless nature…is translated to a higher service, in which it does but incorporate itself with some phase of strong emotion.’ (90) It would be disingenuous to argue that Rossetti’s references to nature are entirely lifelike throughout, however, and as Pater admits, they are also more than decoration, but are pressed into service as metaphor for human actions and feelings.

Reading Rossetti’s poetry – and Pater’s commentary – in the age of the Anthropocene demonstrates the complexity of the relationship between poetry and the environment. Unlike his sister Christina, the atheist Rossetti’s poetry is not driven by faith and an innate belief that the world is a physical manifestation of God’s love, though as John Holmes indicates, drawing on Houston Baker, ‘all earthly beauty comes to be seen as making manifest the transcendental beauty of the spirit’ (*Sonnet Sequence* 26), pointing to the view that Rossetti is constructing a spiritual though not conventionally religious response to the world’s beauties, where ‘hope is grounded on a spiritual ideal’ (Houston Baker 11). That ideal is manifested through nature, just as Christina Rossetti read the world as a reflection of God’s love. It is not realistic to argue that Rossetti was specifically driven by a concern for the environment beyond an aesthetic and metaphysical relish for its beauties, yet he could not have been unaware of the deterioration of the environment in London and other cities, polluted by industry careless of its damaging of the air and water. ‘The Great Stink’, of 1858, was the result of sewage in the Thames, and responsible for three outbreaks of cholera, and as a Londoner Rossetti could not have failed to notice this and other environmental concerns such as smog caused by intensive coal-burning. Moreover, as Holmes points out, ‘[W.M.] Rossetti’s record of … precise observations of animal behaviour is one of the many testimonies to the Pre-Raphaelites’ lively interest in natural history’, indicating the careful observation and enthusiasm which the Brotherhood as a whole devoted to the natural world (*Science*, 45). As my reading of ‘Jenny’ above suggests, then, in his poetry Rossetti draws, if obliquely, on environmental concerns to indicate humanity’s treatment of other humans as well as its careless approach to nature. Yet Ruskin found in art the possibility of discovering the independent individuality of natural objects, writing that, when drawing a tree,

the beautiful lines insisted on being traced….More and more beautiful they became, as each rose out of the rest, and took its place in the air. With wonder increasing every instant, I saw that they ‘composed’ themselves, by finer laws than any know of men. At last, the tree was there, and everything that I had thought before about trees, nowhere! (*Praeterita* 109)

This contrasts with the difficulties Rossetti experienced while painting landscape, though the comment from Holman Hunt quoted previously suggests that this may be due to an overly close attention to detail and a struggle to depict each object with the same realistic care. The contrast between Ruskin’s and Rossetti’s approaches throw into relief two opposing strands of thought in approaches to the environment which continue into the twenty-first century: the concept of Nature as an independent entity which is oblivious to the human world, and the environment as an adjunct or even backdrop to human activity, subject to human plundering.

These views of the environment are clearly delineated in approaches to ‘pathetic fallacy’. An engaged reader of Romantic poetry, Rossetti was arguably one of the Victorian poets for whom the use of pathetic fallacy was ‘a matter of poetic course’ (Miles 1). Like Wordsworth, for Rossetti, objects ‘derive their influence not from properties inherent in them…but from such as are bestowed upon them’ (Wordsworth *Letters* II. 705, qtd. Miles 6). Josephine Miles traces some examples of Rossetti’s use of the trope, noting that though his uses of ‘traditional phrases’ relating nature to human emotion are ‘visibly fewer’ than his contemporaries, and are ‘often used ironically’, he nonetheless indicates that ‘*Nature* shows emotion’ (40-41) and that his examples of pathetic fallacy ‘point to a nature more and more withdrawn from man and independent, not as personified, but as a feeling organism’ (43), a concept to which I will return. The Romantic view of bestowing emotion on objects is vilified by Ruskin, however, who argues in *Modern Painters* III that to attribute human emotions to insensate objects in the natural world is fallacious, since it is the innate power of the object to provoke this sensation, hence his creation of the term ‘pathetic fallacy’; the examples he offers are the power of a gentian to appear blue, or of gunpowder to explode. This concept of the powers of objects to evoke emotion has been extrapolated by poets, some successfully and some less so, he suggests: it is an adherence to truth which matters and which permits the use of pathetic fallacy to strike the right note for the reader. Giving an example, he explains: ‘The state of mind which attributes to it these characters of a living creature is one in which the reason is unhinged by grief.’ (*Modern Painters* V.148) Consequently, poets offer landscape as a reflection of human characteristics to demonstrate passionate feeling: if it is done coldly, the effect is false. It is up to the reader or critic, then, to judge the effectiveness of this construction.

This approach is best traced in ‘The House of Life’ sonnets (or, to give the sequence its full title from the 1870 edition, ‘Sonnets and Songs towards a work to be called “The House of Life”’), on which this essay will now concentrate.[[2]](#endnote-1) The relationship between the speaker’s emotions, depicted through a series of environmental metaphors, and the concepts with which he struggles is one which can be unpicked by exploring his changing approach to nature. Like Elizabeth Siddall or Christina Rossetti in their poetry, nature does not always provide the expected solace or empathy; there is a clear trajectory moving from aesthetic delight in the beauty of God’s earth, despite an awareness of personified Death with which the poems opens and concludes, to the penultimate sonnet, ‘New-born Death’, a resignation to a natural cycle of birth and death which is not necessarily acceptable or comforting, but inevitable. The sequence manifests a tension between aesthetics and environment which undermines the apparent simplicity of the symbolism of the natural world in the ballads and other poems in the collection and which bears out Miles’s argument that for Rossetti, nature becomes more withdrawn from man and increasingly oblivious to its co-occupation of the landscape.

‘The House of Life’ is ‘a model for self-exploration and self-expression in poetry’, as Holmes argues, and if one accepts that the sequence reframes and negotiates the boundaries of the self in the world, these boundaries must necessarily include those between the human and nonhuman (*Sonnet Sequence* 2). As Miles points out, the relationship between the human and its environment is also the ‘problem of relation between self and object’, how one approaches, conceptualises and reframes that object, be it stone or sky (Miles 6). Holmes closely explores Sonnet XXIX, ‘Inclusiveness’, using it as a tool to open up the ‘inclusive’, rather than ambiguous, tone of the writing in *Poems*, and that inclusiveness, I will argue, extends to these negotiated boundaries between the human and natural worlds. Rossetti’s poems seem to resist traditional conceptions of the division between the material and spiritual worlds, though his focus on material, earthly (or earthy) imagery perhaps explains Robert Buchanan’s focus on the ‘fleshly’ aspects of *Poems*. Buchanan’s criticism of the sensual aspects of Rossetti’s poetry is well-known, yet rereading it in the context of environmental approaches it is striking how the language used is frequently that of the natural world: this ‘fleshly school of verse-writers…are diligently spreading the seeds of disease’, while ‘the mind of Mr. Rossetti is like a glassy mere, broken only by the dive of some water-bird or the hum of winged insects, and brooded over by an atmosphere of insufferable closeness, with a light blue sky above it, sultry depths mirrored within it, and a surface so thickly sown with water-lilies that it retains its glassy smoothness even in the strongest wind.’(336, 337). Here, Buchanan seems to be echoing Rossetti’s own style to mock the apparently unpleasant and murky depths of the poet’s mind. Buchanan later describes the use of the marital bed in ‘Nuptial Sleep’ as not ‘even human’ and ‘simply nasty’ (338), indicating a form of animal sexuality in Rossetti’s references in his poem to ‘their long kiss’ (1) and the ‘married flowers to either side outspread’ (6). In this sonnet, the male speaker concludes:

Slowly their souls swam up again, through gleams

Of watered light and dull drowned waifs of day;

Till from some wonder of new woods and streams

He woke, and wondered more: for there she lay. (11-14)

It seems quite probable that the muddy depths of Rossetti’s mind as Buchanan describes them are a reflected version of the lover’s mind in this sonnet, but the ‘wonder’ of the landscape which astounds him when he wakes and beholds his wife offers something fresh, renewing and renewable, which parallels the green natural beauty of ‘woods and streams’ with the natural beauty of a woman. Buchanan’s utter disgust at this and other poems which seem to him ‘fleshly’ and inappropriately erotic – especially ‘Jenny’ – implies the critic’s reluctance to equate women’s bodies with anything wholesome or pure, despite his protestations against this. Sexual contact is itself contaminating to the ‘exquisite picture of nature’ which Buchanan acknowledges Rossetti can produce, ‘flushing the whole poem with unhealthy rose-colour, stifling the senses with overpowering sickliness, as of too much civet.’ (339)[[3]](#endnote-2) The natural environment of the poem has been polluted, then, and when Buchanan turns to other, supposedly better, poets, his language is again that of the natural world: Wordsworth is ‘clear as crystal and deep as the sea’; Dante is ‘full of the thunder of a great Idea’ (347). To offer too frank an indication of sexuality is – perverse as the argument seems – against nature. These poems are ‘morbid’ and ‘unhealthy’ because they are ‘unnatural’ (349): Buchanan may be arguing that they break codes of civilised society and offend public taste, but he does so by equating ‘fleshliness’ with breaking the laws of nature and contaminating something otherwise unsullied. This approach is perhaps clearest as the article draws to its close:

The great strong current of English poetry rolls on, ever mirroring in its bosom new prospects of fair and wholesome thought. Morbid deviations are endless and inevitable; there must be marsh and stagnant mere as well as mountain and wood. (349)

Here, poetry itself is a landscape, and Rossetti’s place in it is in a corrupted, contaminated mere. Reading these natural metaphors in Buchanan’s work emphasises the significance of the role that nature and the environment play in Rossetti’s poetry: what is constructed by the poet as natural and uncontaminated is (mis)read by the critic as itself a danger to the world, while the poems in ‘The House of Life’ uncover ways in which nature is used as a metaphor in society, to be deciphered, or perhaps misunderstood, by the reader.

As a number of critics have suggested, ‘Rossetti is able to formulate symbols which carry a number of meanings at once’ (*Sonnet Sequence* 16). Rossetti’s multiple layers of meaning are, of course, informed by his engagement with Dante, Shakespeare and the Bible, as well as his imagination: a symbol can be loaded with meaning and yet remain a symbol, relying on the reader’s perception. These symbols provide a concrete, intertextual aspect to the ‘abstract presences’ of the poem: time, memory, art, love, life, death (Rees 161). In ‘Supreme Surrender’, the natural metaphors do just this: life is construed as a landscape, with the extraordinary ‘love-sown fallowfield of sleep’ (2), where ‘the deep/Calls to the deep’, a phrase which clearly echoes Psalm 42.7: ‘Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts: all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me.’ This psalm, ‘As the deer pants for water’, expresses the soul’s longing for God as a physical need for the slaking of thirst; Rossetti transforms this longing for the spiritual to a more earthly desire, as the sestet explicates: the ‘waves’ and ‘billows’ of the source text are blasphemously reinvented as a surge of erotic longing, which itself is then undercut as ‘the hand now warm around my neck/Taught memory long to mock desire’ (9-10). This reversal of the biblical metaphor relies for its power on an understanding of the reference, though the unfathomable waters the poem conjures also offer a standalone image. The use of the natural world here becomes more than symbolic; the biblical paradigm suggests a paralleling of humanity with nature, in which some animal instinct or blind sense leads on the speaker. Yet that, too, is undermined by the complex sentence structure, as well as the deep understanding of the abandonment of desire in the final section of the sonnet. When Rees writes of the sequence’s depiction of ‘love as a mystic experience’, it is surely this ambiguous and evocative mixture of natural and biblical imagery to which she refers (163).

Rossetti’s echoes of Dante’s *Vita Nuova* throughout the sequence provide an example of the powerful natural symbols which exceed the symbolic in his work, though Rossetti surpasses Dante in his use of symbolism, especially in the use of natural symbols.[[4]](#endnote-3) In the *Vita Nuova*, symbolism appears in dreams, or in manmade objects, or through the personified figure of Love, so that it is the ‘narrative structure’ rather than the style which echoes Dante most strongly (Ryals 244), a construct which is especially clear when one recalls the natural symbolism of the dove and the poppy, for example, with which Rossetti embellished his paintings of *Beata Beatrix*. Moriconi emphasises how ‘In ‘The House of Life’, human existence is often conceived as a long and difficult path, a strong reminiscence of Dante’s *Vita Nuova* and Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*. From his Italian models, the English poet-painter had also drawn his typical conception of Love, divinity of eros and soul and god of mutability and change’ (70-71). Significantly, Moriconi suggests that ‘Symbolism for Rossetti always involves an exegetical process in which the beholder becomes fully responsible for the determination of the ultimate meaning of art’ (71). Rossetti’s translation of the Italian poets indicates the multiple meanings, especially with natural symbolism, with which he later invested his own sonnets. However, in his translation of Jacopo da Lentino’s poem ‘Of His Lady, and of her Portrait’, an early echo of Sonnet IX, ‘The Portrait, can be traced; yet da Lentino’s canzonetta is plain-spoken, with little imagery or metaphorical language, while Rossetti’s sonnet offers a now-familiar equation of loveliness with nature and desire:

That he who seeks her beauty's furthest goal,  
Beyond the light that the sweet glances throw  
And refluent wave of the sweet smile, may know  
The very sky and sea-line of her soul. (5-8)

Not only does the portrait of the beloved’s face offer ‘light’ and the ‘wave’ of the smile, the soul itself can be seen in the lines of the face, and that soul is a landscape, an entirely different representation of a natural image. Moreover, the poem indicates the possibility of possessing this natural beauty, with the concluding line ‘They that would look on her must come to me’ (14), a phrase redolent of the sinister and misogynistic aside in Robert Browning’s ‘My Last Duchess’: ‘since none puts by/The curtain I have drawn for you, but I’ (9-10). The speaker invites the viewer’s own reading of the portrait, then – yet he also predetermines it, outlining what will be seen if one looks past the image of the face into the constructed landscape of the soul. The implication is then that the natural world is depicted as intrinsic to the human soul in a palimpsestic construction, where ‘her inner soul’ can be represented by layers of paint just as her face is, and the painter-poet can invite the viewer-reader to see, rather than to interpret.

The natural environment provides, then, a shifting, uncertain and often uncomfortable backdrop in ‘The House of Life’ – a framework for the poems that intrudes in ways that take it beyond pathetic fallacy. The sequence was intended by Rossetti, as he wrote in a letter to Hake in April 1870, to be ‘a complete “dramatis personae” of the soul’ (Fredeman V. 450), though many critics from William Michael Rossetti onwards have considered it largely biographical; but its focus on ‘love, life, death and art’ provides an eternal context for which the landscape, as a constant but not unchanging environment, linked to erotic desire, is crucial (Hughes 84). The sequence opens with ‘Bridal Birth’, a metaphorical birth of Love which is constructed as an extended metaphor, set in ‘The grove’ (11). The sonnet moves swiftly from the birth of desire, or Love, to ‘Death’s nuptial change’ (13), and this poem indicates the trajectory of the whole sequence in its rapid shift and metaphorical nuances. Yet to speak of Rossetti’s timeless themes here is to over-simplify a complex work. His approach in his poems, like Dante’s in the *Vita Nuova*, is one which shifts elegantly back and forth, reflected in his use of language and metaphor. In Sonnet III, ‘Lovesight’, the speaker opens with the image of ‘thy face, their altar’ (3), with the Dantesque spirit of Love in the following line. As the poem continues, however, it constructs a landscape specific to the situation of the speaker. The ‘dusk hours’ and the ‘twilight-hidden glimmering’ (5, 7) imply, rather than paint, a natural space in which the lovers may be alone, where the soul seems to glimpse its apotheosis. The sestet undermines this projected pastoral utopia, however, by reimagining the earth without the beloved:

O love, my love! if I no more should see

Thyself, nor on the earth the shadow of thee,

Nor image of thine eyes in any spring,—

How then should sound upon Life’s darkening slope

The ground-whirl of the perished leaves of Hope,

The wind of Death’s imperishable wing? (9-14)

It is love, then, which gives the world its beauties; without it, Life is denuded of Hope, leaving only Death, which is both part of nature and also the destroyer of it. Here, then, nature’s potential meaning, as well as its beauty, comes from love, a view which shifts as the sequence continues.

Sonnet VII, ‘Love’s Lovers’, which again contains a Dantesque style and tone (‘My Lady only loves the heart of Love’ (9), for example), contrasts the metaphorical ‘jewels in Love’s zone’ (1) and ‘gold-tipped darts’ that Love ‘flings’ (2, 3) with the organic setting of nature in Love’s true form. The sonnet’s octet suggests a courtly, medieval setting in which courtly love is played out with the ‘lute’s soft tone’ (4), while its occupants recall the ‘Ladies that have intelligence in love’ of Dante’s *Vita Nuova* (‘Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore’, (1)), though perhaps with less serious intent, for the ‘ladies’ of Rossetti’s poem seem to play with emotions, in a manufactured world which bears no relation to the natural environment. This shifts sharply in the sestet, where ‘My lady’ (9) experiences Love not with carefully wrought jewels, music and ‘silver praise’ (5), but with ‘His bower of unimagined flower and tree’ (11), a liminal space of natural beauty so far from the artificial constructions of the octet that it cannot even be imagined, one of many examples of Rossetti’s observation of the ‘strict division between the octave and the sestets’ (Rees 163). This ‘bower’ of Love remains uncorrupted, then, as an eternal site of incorruptible beauty, where human love can remain closer to *agape* than to *eros*.

As the sequence progresses, the concept of love allied to nature deteriorates. In Sonnet XIV, ‘Love’s Baubles’, the title alone indicates the fabrication of an unnatural adornment, and the poem deploys natural symbols as decayed or contaminated by contact with humanity:

I stood where Love in brimming armfuls bore  
Slight wanton flowers and foolish toys of fruit:  
And round him ladies thronged in warm pursuit,  
Fingered and lipped and proffered the strange store:  
And from one hand the petal and the core  
Savoured of sleep; and cluster and curled shoot  
Seemed from another hand like shame’s salute,—  
Gifts that I felt my cheek was blushing for. (1-8)

The second line here suggests the triviality of the flowers and fruit when repurposed in the service of erotic love. There are resonances of Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market’, although in ‘Love’s Baubles’ the women willingly ‘thronged’ to touch the fruit, whereas in Christina’s poem it must eventually be forced upon Lizzie, who has glimpsed the harm that lies behind seductive natural images. Like ‘Goblin Market’, this sonnet suggests that nature can tempt, with decay and evil hidden at its heart, but this version is more explicit; ‘the petal and the core’ gesture towards genitalia, and link the seductiveness of nature more explicitly with sexual desire. Yet nature is not the tempter here; it is romantic love, a human construct, which facilitates the seduction. The fruit and flowers, however, are transformed when offered by ‘my Lady’ (9); they take on the sheen of dew and shine ‘With inmost heaven-hue’ (12), so that it is the way in which we read the natural world which is significant here, rather than any quality intrinsic in nature itself. Nature is here withdrawing, then; it becomes symbolic, and is deployed representatively in the sonnet, signifying not the unreliability of nature, but the fluctuations of human emotion.

The subsequent sonnet, ‘Winged Hours’, follows the perfection of fruit offered by the beloved with the metaphor of passing time as a bird. Throughout the sequence as a whole, ‘the all-pervasive element of experience is temporal change’, rather than ‘The eternity of God’ (Rees 163), but this is expressed through sonnets which vary from those which are entirely abstract to those which use natural imagery to provide tangible representations of the corrupted environment. As Wendell Harris posits, ‘Many of his most successful passages in the sonnet sequence occur when he turns from generalized abstraction to translation of feeling by visualizable natural imagery.’ (Harris 304) The bird moves ‘along/The rustling covert of my soul’ (2-3), aligning the speaker’s soul with a wooded landscape inhabited by a bird, yet the bird’s song ‘suffers wrong/Through our contending kisses’ (7-8). Why is the song damaged by the lovers’ kisses – because of a tainted or contaminating impure desire? The meaning is ambiguous, but the sestet anticipates the coming severance of death, the violence of which leaves ‘The bloodied feathers scattered in the brake’ (12) while the beloved ‘Sees through the untuneful bough the wingless skies’ (14) as forms of life become extinct from the landscape. Like the ‘Blessed Damozel’, death causes a separation but does not remove the presence of the beloved entirely. Instead, the environment is permanently altered by it: the removal of the bird, who represents Love, dissolves the pleasure of nature forever. Perhaps the natural world is withdrawing because the speaker can no longer appreciate it, due to the strength of his emotional stress. Yet nature, of course, changes only with the seasons, not in response to human emotion, and so the shift is only in the mind of the speaker.

The core of ‘The House of Life’, in all its iterations, is the four sonnets of ‘Willowwood’, which initiated Rossetti’s writing of the sequence. ‘Willowwood’ provides a haunted liminal space in which the speaker explores a future without the beloved, with painful vividness: ‘The peculiar strength of the sonnets is that they have the arbitrary clarity of a dream sequence, but they are presented as wakeful experiences: literally, as waking dreams.’ (McGann) Like the previous examples, the ‘Willowwood’ sonnets indicate the breakdown of the relationship between humanity and the natural environment, but here this is a failure of human understanding. The ‘woodside well’ (1) where the speaker meets the Dantean figure of Love is a manmade construction harnessing natural resources for the purpose of human refreshment, a concept which is undermined here as refreshment of body or soul is withheld. The setting is otherwise natural, but increasingly malevolent. Love, then, appears in his native environment, it seems, and the water from the spring permits the speaker a glimpse of his lost beloved’s face. Nature combined with Love, then, is sympathetic, allowing a brief moment of contact, with ‘her own lips rising there/Bubbled with brimming kisses at my mouth.’ (13-14) The third sonnet of the sequence indicates the purgatorial implications of the enclosed space of Willowwood in which the sonnets are set, and its inhabitants recall the inhabitants of Dante’s *Purgatorio*: ‘O ye, all ye that walk in Willowwood,/That walk with hollow faces burning white’ (1-2), representing those who face ‘lifelong night’ (4) through the loss of a beloved. The crucial sestet of Sonnet III indicates the growing hostility of the natural environment, however: this is not a beautiful place and there is no solace to be found here: rather, the ‘bitter banks’ (9) are carpeted ‘With tear-spurge wan, with blood-wort burning red’ (10). The first of these is an invented variety of spurge, while the second a generic form of wort, but the vividness of these imagined plants indicates the speaker’s deteriorating connection with the natural world, with tears and blood conjuring both loss and violence. However, it stops short of pathetic fallacy; Rossetti does not ascribe emotions to the surroundings, but uses his descriptors to guide the reader towards an understanding of speaker’s sense of desolation. There is, in fact, nothing ‘natural’ about the haunted space of ‘Willowwood’; it is ‘a kind of dark night of the soul where deprivation is the condition’, and nature is indifferent to human suffering (McGann). Citing ‘The Lovers’ Walk’ (added to the 1886 version of ‘The House of Life’) as an example, Houston Baker argues that ‘Not only does the poet believe that he can withdraw from “the world’s throng” into the beauty of nature with his beloved, but nature itself seems to emulate the state of the lovers.’ (Houston Baker 6) Such a belief in the possibilities of nature, and atypical use of pathetic fallacy, suggests, in the context of my analysis, that Rossetti here is indicating the false hope which the beauties of nature can provide, though fleetingly.

The instances discussed here combine to form a picture of nature both contaminated and rejected by humanity, in a trajectory which is increasingly insistent. The corruption may come from mankind, in a biblical sense which is aesthetically akin to Christina Rossetti’s,[[5]](#endnote-4) but without the religious underpinning; a Christian God is not evoked in ‘The House of Life’, and biblical echoes provide no spiritual comfort. ‘[L]ife, death, and (re)birth become cornerstones in “The House of Life”’, as Donnelly observes, but these leitmotifs also characterise the natural world, and lead the reader to question what ‘nature’ *is* (Donnelly 53). How is it affiliated to human nature? How do the human and nonhuman spheres coexist? Does one corrupt the other, or are they mutually destructive? In ‘The Landmark’, sonnet XXXI, the ‘woodside well’ of ‘Willowwood’ is echoed, yet here the speaker’s relationship with his surroundings becomes vicious, as he ‘flung the pebbles from its brink/In sport to send its imaged skies pell-mell’ (3-4). The realisation that nature reflected in water is only a transient image, just as the concept that nature might provide comfort has been destroyed, leads him to disturb the oblivious surface of the water – ‘And mine own image’ (5). Humanity and nature are thus inextricably linked; to break the calm water is also to shatter one’s doppelgänger, whilst acknowledging, as the speaker goes on to do in the octet, that he will ‘thirst to drink’ (10) from the water he has disturbed, allowing nature to feed his body while it cannot comfort his soul. Mark Frost points out that ‘Ruskin experienced strong emotion when encountering beauty or its loss, because […] pollution was a synecdoche of a broader disordering brought about by deliberate human interference with vital helpfulness.’(Frost 25) The ‘sport’ of the speaker is an ‘interference’ which both stems from and causes distress, polluting the water with the speaker’s emotions.

This discomfiting sense of self-destruction is then deferred in ‘Barren Spring’, however, where nature’s own changes, feminised as ‘like a girl’ (2) brings Spring – but a Spring oblivious to the barrenness of Winter, and a Spring which is itself not just barren but destructive. Again the speaker introduces images of nature as damaging, with the crocus ‘a withering flame’ (1), and, most tellingly, ‘this apple-blossom’s part/To breed the fruit that breeds the serpent’s art’ (10-11). It is not just humankind which destroys the environment, but nature which is actively extinguishing humanity, as it creates the fruit which bears the seeds of the Fall, in the biblical metaphor deployed. This is no Eden, but the corrupted post-lapsarian world, which offers clues to the source of Nature’s harm: its relationship with and desire for the female body and sexuality, the loss of which has caused the narrator’s melancholy. The female body has an uncomfortable relation to nature, being both part of it and corrupted by it, as well as contaminating it and, by extension, humanity. Donnelly argues that ‘“The House of Life” journeys through the psychology of male deliberations on love, sex, faith and death’, so the reader must acknowledge the male perspective of the female body in the sonnets, in both a spiritual and erotic sense (56). Erotic love as experienced by the male is corrupting because of the necessary contact with the female body, and the subsequent loss after its withdrawal, and this is the root cause of the decaying environment, where death is inherent in every flower. The wise man will ‘turn thy face from them,/Nor gaze till on the year’s last lily-stem/The white cup shrivels round the golden heart’ (12-14). Facing nature’s obliviousness to humanity, and acknowledging the decay at the heart of all life, human and nonhuman, is the bleak answer the poet provides.

This alignment of womanhood with nature is apparent in the fruit-picking of sonnet XXXVIII, ‘Hoarded Joy’, where the male speaker wishes to leave the fruit to ripen on the tree, while the woman argues seductively that ‘it is sweet and red’ (2). The tree is imbued with selfhood as it gazes at ‘its own fecundity’ (4) in the stream, while the narrator realises his delay has caused the fruits to overripen and decay, fallen and floating in the water. The sonnet indicates the damage of the passing of time, offering the tree’s overripeness as a synonym for the woman’s life, perhaps echoing in the sestet the sentiments of Robert Herrick’s ‘Gather ye Rosebuds’. The concluding line, ‘And the woods wail like echoes from the sea’ (14) offers a direct personification of Nature, as its sorrow is released before the coming again of Winter, responding only to its own cycle, unconscious of its effect on mankind. The penultimate sonnet, XLIX, the second sonnet of ‘Newborn Death’, reinforces this repeated unintended tragedy of Nature’s cycles of death and renewal. The ‘woods and waves’ (5) have witnessed love, but Death is the only consequence of this love, and so the human constructions of Love, Song and Art ‘o’er the book of Nature mixed their breath’ (12): the implication is that for a while, these personified human comforts might mingle with Nature, and seem to put it to their service, but these things too must die, so for all living things the outcome is always, unrelentingly, Death. The final sonnet, ‘Hope’, asks how we can ‘assuage the unforgotten pain’ (3), offering apparently hopeful images of Peace: ‘Or may the soul at once in a green plain,/Stoop through the spray of some sweet life-fountain/And cull the dew-drenched flowering amulet/’ (6-8). The ambiguous relationship of the speaker with the natural world throughout the sequence indicates that this painterly image of the landscape is not able to provide comfort for the loss of the beloved, as the questioning approach also suggests, and yet the sestet provides a final, beautiful and peaceful image that gestures towards the speaker’s continued hope:

Ah! when the wan soul in that golden air

   Between the scriptured petals softly blown

Peers breathless for the gift of grace unknown,—

Ah! let none other alien spell soe’er

But only the one Hope’s one name be there,—

Not less nor more, but even that word alone. (9-14)

The soul is moved by winds in the air between the ‘scriptured petals’, which fancifully implies that the book of Nature is written on the flowers, and thus the soul has no volition in its drifting, despite the apparent peace of the wind’s movement. The cycle is complete, here, where Nature is at last combined with Hope – not comfort, precisely, not emotion or empathy, but with an acceptance of beauty for the sake of beauty which is the only courage the environment can ultimately provide for the soul. A Christian faith is absent, but ultimately only a pantheistic faith in oblivious nature can offer solace.

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1. *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. W.E. Fredeman (Cambridge: DS Brewer, 2002), vol. IV p. 413. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A longer version of this sequence appeared in Rossetti’s *Ballads and Sonnets* of 1881, though a different version with a more positive tone was also constructed in 1874. For further information on the narrative and structure, as well as publication history, of ‘The House of Life’, see Ryals. The numbering of sonnets used in this essay refers to the 1870 version. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
3. It is worth mentioning here that civet is a musky perfume ingredient derived from the animal of the same name. Consequently, it is of natural origin but is overpowering and often unpleasant in its use. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
4. However, as Rees, Elizabeth Helsinger and Donnelly, among others, have pointed out, ‘The House of Life’ also echoes Dante’s *Purgatorio*, such as in Canto XIII, where the penitents can see nature’s beauty but it remains out of their reach, incorruptible but also purely representative, unable to provide solace. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
5. See Trowbridge, ‘“Truth to Nature”: The Pleasures and Dangers of the Environment in Christina Rossetti’s Poetry’, for further discussion of Christina Rossetti’s biblical approach to the natural environment. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)