

# Love, longing and hope in three sonnets from ‘Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets’

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## **Abstract**

Christina Rossetti (1830 – 1894) has usually been recognized as one of the most prominent Victorian female poets both by her contemporaries and present scholars since her rediscovery in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, not all her works have received the same attention, being most of them shadowed by her fairy tale masterpiece *Goblin Market* (1862). In addition, she has quite often been undervalued or misinterpreted due to the extent religion has influenced almost every of her poems. Although her sonnet sequence ‘Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets’ from her poem collection *A Peasant and Other Poems* (1881) has long been neglected, some scholars have lately been interested in it due to the recuperation of woman voices in recent gender studies. Here the attempt is to provide some other possible interpretations of the poems of this sonnet sequence by analysing the themes of love, longing and hope in the third, the eight and the last sonnet. For that purpose, it seems necessary to give some background information such as the historical context and C. Rossetti’s religious influences, preceding and contemporary women poets, and Pre-Raphaelitism, together with a brief biography of this poetess. Then, we will turn to the sonnet sequence suggesting an interpretation of the title regarding unnamed ladies and the way in which they are given voice in the sequence, highlighting some facts about the sonnet itself and finally referring to C. Rossetti’s introduction to her work. There is no need to say that three quotations by Dante and Petrarch which precede each poem are important and closely knit with the poems themselves. The meaning of each stanza, tone, mood, syntax, punctuation, texture and imagery will be analysed. To conclude, the decrease of hope and longing, the acceptance of reality, and the strength of the several manifestations love will be suggested as the link of the sonnets chosen from ‘Monna Innominata’.

**Keywords:** Christina Rossetti, Monna Innominata, sonnets, hope, love, longing.

## **Index**

Introduction .....	1
Historical background: the Victorian age .....	1
The Oxford Movement .....	3
Women poets .....	3
Pre-Raphaelitism .....	4
Christina Rossetti's life story .....	5
Introduction to 'Monna Innominata' .....	8
Analysis of three poems .....	11
Sonnet n. 3 .....	11
Sonnet n. 8 .....	14
Sonnet n. 14 .....	18
Conclusion .....	21
References .....	22
Appendix .....	25

## **Introduction**

Since Virginia Woolf rediscovered her at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this great and prolific Victorian poet has fascinated several scholars who lately have tried to decipher the meanings of her poetic works.

Christina Rossetti, together with her contemporary female poets, had to fight against the convention of poetry being silenced for women (Wiseman). In addition, they tried to revert the fact that women in poetry were “reduced to a fixed meaning as opposed to being treated as complex human beings” (Byrecroft). In fact, these Victorian female poets “forg[ed] a unique discourse of their own from within the patriarchal form” (Wiseman) and by doing so, found a place in the public sphere, to which they had been refused the access (Touché).

What is captivating about C. Rossetti is that she wrote confidently and legitimately “from the role of a woman, to women and about women’s issues” without being “a victim or an object with a pen” (Womble). And so is her understanding and expression of human emotions, “silence and oblivion” despite being a recluse (Mermin xiv).

However, scholars still define her as a “spinster” or a “nun of art” for her religious beliefs and marital status, therefore misreading the conception of her poetry, which has been criticised “for its affirmations of female piety, passivity, and submission, while her strength and independence of thought and art have hardly been recognized at all” (qtd. in Touché, Mermin xi).

The present paper aims to analyse the themes of love, longing and hope in three sonnets by Christina Rossetti’s from her sonnet sequence ‘Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets’. To this end, it will first be necessary to provide some background information about C. Rossetti’s writing, such as the Victorian age, the Oxford Movement, Victorian female writers’ literary tradition and the Pre-Raphaelitism. This will be followed by the third, eighth and fourteenth sonnets of ‘Monna Innominata’, and finally, a number of conclusions will be outlined.

## **Historical background: the Victorian age**

The Victorian age was an age of growth for the British empire, of technological wonder, scientific discoveries, as well as misery and sickness; a time of fast lifestyle and belief

changes where “the comforting myths of the Bible were being destroyed by a new belief in science” (BBC, “Dreams and Nightmares”, 00:10:05 - 00:10:07).

However, not all Victorians lost faith, and some of them, as Christina Rossetti herself, sought refuge in new forms of religion as the Oxford Movement of Tractarians, “a complex but devout group that campaigned for greater spiritual observance in the face of industrial modernity” (Purchase 4).

Vast gatherings of humanity and industrialization took place when Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837, and by the time she died in 1901 a completely new lifestyle was established with the invention of the modern city. The population increase brought devastating consequences such as unemployment and rampant diseases (BBC, “Painting the Town”). However, in Christina Rossetti’s poetry, the lack of portrayal of the industrial revolution suggests many interpretations. Noise, energy, pollution, and progress are the great absents in her poetry.

The so called home sweet home family houses became the refugees from vice, crime and drink, from the dark and poor side of the modern city life (BBC, “Home, Sweet Home”). The home was “the exclusive and private domain of the family”, where men and women had their ‘separate spheres’: women the private one, men the public one (Himmelfarb 54). The wife and mother was the pivotal element holding the house together, commonly known as the “angel in the house” (BBC, “Home, Sweet Home”). “The means to employ a maidservant, to spend more time caring for their children, to live in larger and better-furnished homes, to feed and clothe their families better, to read and write – such were the tangible results of economic growth [of the industrial revolution] for these women” (Anderson and Zinsser 130). Even though this sphere “is deemed oppressive and degrading, for it consigns women to a single role and a single place, thus depriving them of the essential human attributes of liberty and equality” (Himmelfarb 60), some of them, including C. Rossetti, seem to have been a comfortable place, a place where they felt secured and able to develop, in the case of C. Rossetti, her poetical creativity.

Women were, in addition, constrained by the use of corsets, which apart from the aesthetic, it mainly had a moral purpose. It was a dangerous piece of clothing for rips could be crushed and organs misplaced. Moreover, it caused many women to suffer from dyspepsia, complicating their eating and breathing (BBC, “Home, Sweet Home”).

Many artists of the day, in an attempt to escape that maddening atmosphere, found inspiration in a magical past, the Medieval fantasy world, rejecting science and industry. The Pre-Raphaelites for instance, together with our object of study, Christina Rossetti, took shelter from the surprising changes taking place in an alternative reality as we will see (BBC, “Dreams and Nightmares”).

### **The Oxford Movement**

The Oxford Movement, which we have already mentioned as C. Rossetti’s comforting source, arose together with scientific discoveries and liberalism, and an evangelic revival which brought back religious values inspired on medieval religion against the growing secularization. The trigger for its creation, however, was the Parliament Reform Act on expense reduction of the Irish Anglican Church, which was a religious minority in Ireland. This reform aimed to reduce parishes into ten dioceses as well as reduce Anglicans’ presence in parliament. Thus, when John Keble, the leader of the religious movement, read the sermon ‘National Apostasy’ in 1833, the movement was born, for Keble thought that religion was being attacked because of this reform, and so, he defended that religion should not depend on the state but go back to faith practice (Edwards).

The Oxford Movement (c.1830s – 40s), also known as “The Tractarians” published a series of *Tracts for the Times*, which brought back great truths of faith such as the Eucharist, embodiment, redemption, rites, and faith life among other pivotal values of religion. One of the great contributions of this movement was the creation of religious Sisterhood orders and the number of clergymen they promoted.

C. Rossetti became acquainted with this movement when attending church services given by the Reverend William Dodsworth, who was in touch with one of the leaders of the Oxford Movement: E. B. Pusey (Thomas). This contributes to understand spirituality in her poetry, which is so opposed to materialism, and in the fact that she worked as a volunteer at St Mary Magdalen Home for Fallen Women for almost ten years.

### **Women poets**

Although the most prominent Victorian women poets, apart from Christina Rossetti (1830 - 1894), are Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806 – 1861) and Emily Brontë (1818 - 1848), there were poetic “grandmothers” who have been forgotten but made their way in the realm of poetry. Among them we could highlight Felicia Hemans (1793 – 1835) and

Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1802 – 1838), known as L. E. L. (Rosenblum 9), which influenced C. Rossetti's work "in particular the cultivation of melancholy and a longing for death" (Jones 15). Nineteenth-century women poets and their predecessors are mainly characterized by the poetry of endurance: they "typically wr[o]te about unfulfilled desire, loss, and self-sacrifice, and also about the persistence of desire through pain, sometimes leading to an apocalyptic reversal of terms, life into death and death into life" (Rosenblum 15).

These three nineteenth-century women poets, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, E. Brontë and C. Rossetti, "shared the 'double mischief' of the female poet, struggling for credibility" at a time where women had little place in poetry (Jones 1). As Jones explains, they were not only acquainted with each other's work, but also "connected together by a complex web of references and borrowings that demonstrate a shared experience of female poetic art" (1).

One great problem all women poets had to face was the issue of femininity in their writing: being feminine, as Christina was considered to be, meant to be "passive and non-intellectual and therefore better because it did not seek to stray outside the territory allotted to women" (Jones 231). In this case, they were praised; however, they were not compared with their male counterparts. On the other hand, if they were considered 'unfeminine', as critics often considered Elizabeth Barret Browning "the 'female Byron of our time'" (16), they were criticised "for unsuccessfully trying to imitate men" (231). In either case, their writing did not satisfy male criticism.

### **Pre-Raphaelitism**

This artistic group, and later also literary, was formed in 1848 when seven young painters who thought "[a]rt had become tired and decadent, relying on outworn conventions" got together and formed the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (Thomas 66). These were: W. H. Hunt, J. E. Millais, Gabriel and William Rossetti, J. Collinson, T. Woolner and F. Stephens. "If the only painters true to nature had been those who worked before Raphael, then it was necessary to turn right back to the Middle Ages for inspiration", being this the origin of the group's name (66).

Swinburne, G. Meredith, W. Bell Scott, W. Allingham, A. O'Shaughnessy and J. Payne, among others contributed to the movement at some point. Christina Rossetti, although

not an official member, posed for her brother several times: in *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* and in *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* as well as for several portraits.

In 1850, “the group published a literary magazine, *The Germ: Thoughts Towards Nature in Poetry, Literature, and Art*” which included some of Christina Rossetti’s early poems (Roe xxi)<sup>1</sup>. She, “the only woman to publish with the Brotherhood, was not immune to this neo-medievalist influence, writing under a pseudonym borrowed from an old ballad, ‘Ellen Alleyn’” which her brother suggested (xxii) and which may precede what later on will be the sequence ‘Monna Innominata’, where unnamed ladies, as she was when using a pseudonym, had voice.

In 1858 Gabriel Rossetti and the second wave of Pre-Raphaelites including Burne-Jones and W. Morris painted the Oxford murals with an Arthurian inspiration. That same year, Morris published *The Deference of Guenevere*, which has been identified “as the first Pre-Raphaelite book of poetry” (Roe xxiv). Nonetheless, their first successful publication was Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* (1862), with her brother Dante Gabriel’s illustrations. “Such was the impact of *Goblin Market* that in 1894 she was still being referred to as ‘Queen of the Pre-Raphaelites’” (xxvi).

### **Christina Rossetti’s life story**

Christina Georgina Rossetti was born in London on December 5, 1830. She was the daughter of Gabriele Rossetti (1783 - 1854) an Italian exile and Frances née Polidori (1800 - 1886), and the youngest of four children. Gabriele Rossetti immigrated from Naples to England in 1824, and two years later married Frances, (half-English, half-Italian) who had been a governess. G. Rossetti was a passionate and controversial Dante scholar and a patriotic poet. He later worked as Italian teacher at Kings’ College in 1831 and always welcomed other Italian exiles at their home. C. Rossetti’s siblings were: Maria Francesca (1827 - 1876), Dante Charles Gabriel (1828 - 1882), and William Michael (1829 - 1919).

She was educated at home by her mother, as many Victorians, and as her brothers at the beginning, and was brought up evangelical as her mother. Around 1840 her mother, sister and herself stopped attending Holy Trinity Church to start going to Christ Church,

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<sup>1</sup> “The influence of the *Germ* on other young artists far exceeded its poor sales, which brought the magazine to an end after only four issues” (Roe xxiii-xxiv).



becoming Tractarians, as we have already explained, influenced by the Oxford Movement.

Christina Rossetti wrote her first poem, “To my Mother on her Birthday,” when she was eleven. From her first volume “to her last, all Rossetti’s books of poetry were dedicated to her mother” (Flowers xxxviii). Together with her siblings wrote stories and poems for the family magazine, first called *The Hodge Podge* and its successor, the *Illustrated Magazine* (Jones 6).

When she was twelve, Mr Rossetti fell ill and almost blind, so he was no longer able to teach: “The Rossetti’s financial situation became desperate” (Jones 13). Frances worked again as a governess; William at the civil service, which he hated, “and would have preferred to study medicine, but there was no money to pay for his training” (14); Maria Rossetti as governess as well, while D. G. Rossetti continued his art studies and C. Rossetti remained at home taking care of her father.

In 1845, when she was fifteen, she suffered from an illness about which it has often speculated, even at the time the diagnosis was not clear; heart condition, a “religious mania”, anxiety, mental breakdown. So, “seeing the inevitable advance of governing [she] chose instead to be ill” (Thomas 52).

Some of her poems were published by her grandfather Polidori in 1847 in the private collection called *Verses: Dedicated to Her Mother*.

During her adolescence, Christina Rossetti sat for some of her brother’s<sup>2</sup> and his friends’ paintings and concentrated on poetry, publishing a couple of poems in the *Athenaeum* encouraged by her brothers<sup>3</sup>, together with *The Germ*, the pre-Raphaelite press. In addition, it is believed that she wrote the novella *Maude* during her late teens, around 1848 and 1850.

This period is also important in her life because it is the time in which she was engaged to James Collinson, whom she had met at the Pre-Raphaelite meetings held at her home. However, the engagement ended in 1850 as he later reverted to Roman Catholicism, (he even “wanted to become a Catholic priest” (Thomas 92)). After this, “she suffered what

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<sup>2</sup> “In 1849 Gabriel exhibited *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* for which Christina posed.

<sup>3</sup> See Jones for more information about these early poems.

she later described as a severe attack of neuralgia – probably an anxiety attack – which led to her illness being diagnosed as ‘angina pectoris’ (99).

As the family’s economic situation was still delicate, Christina Rossetti and her mother start a small day school in 1851, but a year later they had to close it as it did not prosper, “London at this time abounded in small schools run by impecunious ladies” (Thomas 104). By 1854 this problem ended for William’s salary increased and could maintain them.

Her most successful publication, and unofficially of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (Rosenblum 4), was *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, which was published in 1862, three years after its composition in 1859. Christina Rossetti “always denied that she intended anything more than a simple fairy tale by it” (Thomas 165). She did not have enough sexual knowledge to have thought it with those implications. However, it is possible that she got inspired by her volunteer work in a home for fallen women: St Mary Magdalen Home for Fallen Women on Highgate Hill, where she worked from 1859 until 1870.

In 1864, D.G. Rossetti urged his sister to expand the short lyric *The Fairy Prince Who Arrived Too Late* and write a second volume of poems. *The Prince’s Progress*<sup>4</sup> was published in 1866.

It is around this time that Christina Rossetti “fell in love again” (Thomas 212). This new suitor was Charles Cayley, a former pupil of her father’s. It is worth mentioning that between 1862-1868 she wrote the sequence of love poems in Italian: *Il Rosseggiar dell’Oriente; Canzoniere all’Amico lontano* which she locked in her desk and her brother William found posthumously (215). “The Italian poems are paralleled in English by [her] ‘Monna Innominata’ sonnets” (Jones 116). In 1866 Cayley proposed, but since “his ideas were far removed from Christian orthodoxy ... she refused him, although ‘no woman ever loved a man more deeply or more constantly’” (Thomas 218).

Mrs Rossetti, her mentor and beloved mother, died in 1886 leaving her down in her solitude. “The outward Christina was to be observed in the dumpy black-clad little woman who seldom left her house except for Divine Service in Woburn Square” (Thomas 364). Christina Rossetti’s “enforced isolation increased her shyness and, without her mother to bolster her courage, she found social events more and more trying” (Jones 214).

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<sup>4</sup> See appendix for more publications by C. Rossetti.

Christina Rossetti died of breast cancer, against which she had been fighting since 1891, on December 29, 1894. After her death, her brother William discovered many unpublished poems which he gathered and included in his biography of her sister, sometimes editing them, in addition to writing her biography.

### **Introduction to ‘Monna Innominata’**

This sonnet sequence, which was published in 1881 in the poem collection *A Pageant and Other Poems*, is an homage to Elizabeth Barret Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, and “Dante’s, and Petrarch’s notions of the blatant inequality of Love” (Stein). In fact, she uses direct quotations of Dante and Petrarch, portraying that characteristically echoic nature of her poetry (Rosenblum 2). In addition, it is also believed to be a response to his brother D.G. Rossetti’s *The House of Life*.

On the one hand, C. Rossetti emphasizes “religious in addition to romantic love” in contrast with E. Barret Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, where secular love is a central theme (Oxford Enciclopedia 412). On the other hand, she echoes “the hopelessness of Petrarch and Dante – exhibiting ... that obstinate longing for something lost out of life” and unreachable (Jones 117).

Through a wordy introduction, C. Rossetti explains that the narrator of the following poems will be “a lady in the days of troubadours, who loved yet could not declare her love” (Thomas 216). Because of this impediment and the static and empty images of these ladies provided by the long list of male poets, C. Rossetti tries to demystify them and provide them with complex feelings.

This idea of the troubadours’ time was not just a Pre-Raphaelite fashion, but authors such as Laetitia Landon and Dora Greenwell also wrote about it. According to her biographer Jones, C. Rossetti found a “mask to hide behind” in these references to troubadours and anonymous medieval male poets, just as Elizabeth Barrett Browning did with *Sonnets from the Portuguese*<sup>5</sup> hiding the personal expressions of affection which in this case is thought to be directed to Cayley.

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<sup>5</sup> There is a theory which argues that *Sonnets from the Portuguese* refers to “the *Portuguese Letters* from Caterina to Camoens, purporting to be from a Portuguese nun to a soldier” (Jones 118). However, it is also

It may be argued that the title ‘Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets’ is written in Italian as an homage to the Italian troubadours and sonneteers, and to those women without a name courtly love male poets wrote about.

Usually, Italian poets, such as Dante and Petrarch, praised a woman who, from their point of view, “mingled spiritual or religious qualities with her more ordinary physical charms” (Oxford Encyclopedia 41). This prototypical lady all these courtly love poems refer to, the ‘*donna angelicata*’ or angelic lady, is “attenuated, and disappears into the mist of a symbol, into the undefined sweetness of a yearning towards the ideal”<sup>6</sup> (qtd. in Spiller 29). These ideas agree with the patriarchal literary tradition, where the female “is most often the stationary – or fleeting – symbol of the poet’s quest for self-transcendence” (Rosenblum 7). Although Petrarch and Dante wrote about some well-known ladies, Laura and Beatrice respectively, it is widely accepted that sonnets tend not to reveal intimate details as the identity of the lover they are addressed to, being thus unnamed, ‘*innominata*’. By giving voice to the silenced women in the domain of the courtly love sonnets, C. Rossetti subverts the conventional roles of the aforementioned literary tradition.

The word ‘*monna*’ used in the title is the abbreviation of ‘*madonna*’, which means lady in Italian. Dante, for instance, refers to his idealized lady Beatrice, *Monna Bice* (i.e. *Madonna Beatrice*) in *Vita Nuova* and *Divina Commedia* (Spiller 40). The name Beatrice comes from Latin *beatrix*, meaning “who makes happy,” and also from *beatus* meaning “happy, blessed,” (Online Etymology Dictionary). This Beatrice is commonly believed to be Beatrice Portinari (1266 – 1290), a noble Florentine who Dante might have met during his childhood. Beatrice was for Dante “an image of nobility, of virtue, of the Redeemed Life, and in some sense of Almighty God himself” (William 8).

The Laura Francis Petrarch writes about, whom he met the 6<sup>th</sup> April 1327, is thought to be Laura de Sade (1309 - 1348), wife of a merchant of Avignon (Spiller 46). It is not clear whether Laura was this lady’s real name or a *senhal*<sup>7</sup> supplied by Petrarch, however, this name provided him with a wide range of metaphorical, symbolic and mythical terms,

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believed that the title is due to the affectionate way in which Mr. Browning called his wife due to her darkness.

<sup>6</sup> Mario Mariti, *Storio dello Stil Nuovo*, Lecce, 1972, pp 159-60 (trans).

<sup>7</sup> “A *senhal* was a secret name bestowed on a Lady (or on himself) by a Provençal poet – the name of a flower, for example, so that the poet could praise the flower as covert praise of his Lady. Laura is certainly the right kind of name for a *senhal*” (Spiller 206).

since the name “‘Laura’ or ‘Lauretta’, derives from ‘laurus’, the laurel or baytree”, the tree which Apollo’s beloved Dafne turned into, becoming the patron of poets (Spiller 61). Thus, when referring to Laura, Petrarch may be not only referring his object of love but also his aspiration as a writer, the laurel crown of poetry<sup>8</sup>. In addition, the name ‘Laura’ is a homophone of the word ‘l’aura’, meaning ‘the breeze’, and also of ‘l’auro’, which means ‘gold’, the laurel representing “both Laura herself and the speaker/poet, since the breeze can stand for Laura and the inspiration of the speaker, and gold for Laura’s hair and for Apollo, the sun god, source of poetry and patron of poets” (61).

Once that we have analysed the first part of the title, let’s turn to the sonnet. The sonnet is a lyrical poem consisting on fourteen rhyming lines which have an equal length which varies depending on the type (New Shorter 2947; Oxford Companion 950). Although there are different types of sonnets, we will now have a look at the Petrarchan one, since this is the one used by Christina Rossetti in ‘Monna Innominata’<sup>9</sup>. The Italian or Petrarchan sonnet is hendecasyllabic, formed by an 8-line *octave* of two quatrains rhyming *abbaabba* and a 6-lined *sestet* usually rhyming *cdecde* or *cdcdcd* (Grellet 40). Nevertheless, C. Rossetti uses iambic pentameters which are the conventional rhyming patterns of the English or Shakespearean sonnet. The unequal relationship between these two parts is the essence of the sonnet’s form; for the octave forms a proposition or observation and the sestet proposes the resolution or conclusion. The transition between both parts is usually a *volta* (turn), starting in the 9<sup>th</sup> line and sometimes signalled with a white line (Fuller 2).

The sonnet was originated at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century in southern Italy by Giacomo da Lentino and a group of poets, influenced by the *canso* or *canzone* of the Provençal poets or troubadours of the 11<sup>th</sup> century of southern France. These “composed poems and music of sensual love between high-born and nobly disposed lovers” (Spiller 15).

Afterwards another group of poets arose, who “proclaim[ed] themselves writers in a ‘sweet new style’” which musicalized the sonnet: the *dolce stil nuovo*<sup>10</sup> (Spiller 28). In

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<sup>8</sup> “Petrarch described himself in the title he supplied for the Rime as ‘laureatus’” (Spiller 61)

<sup>9</sup> For more information about the other types see bibliography.

<sup>10</sup> Among the components of the group was Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) at the beginning of his career.

addition, they provided the sonnet with a new kind of /I/ which did not present the Lady as an adversary as the previous did (Spiller 29).

However, the sonnet did not become famous until the 14<sup>th</sup> century with Petrarch's love poetry (Baldick, Oxford Enciclopedia 41).

The *sonnet* came to Great Britain in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Oxford Enciclopedia 42). It is believed that the word sonnet came from Middle French (1540s). Another source may be the Italian *sonetto* meaning "little song," which at the same time is the diminutive for *suono*, "sound", although it is also argued that it might come from Old Provençal sonnet (meaning "song,") which is the diminutive of *son*, "song, sound, ". The last theory is that it might also come from Latin *sonus* "sound" (Oxford Enciclopedia 41 , Sharp). Whatever the real source, what the etymology of the word makes clear is that it was closely related to music.

Sets of sonnets can be connected by a common theme or subject and provide variations of a given theme, forming thus sonnet-sequences (Fuller 37). 'Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets' is thus a sonnet sequence in which the linking theme is that of longing and of divine and secular love. In this sequence, C. Rossetti "manages to create a persona of much belief and integrity, who conveys what, in her estimation, romantic love can and should be" (Bocher).

### **Analysis of three sonnets**

Although it would be incredibly interesting to analyse the complete sequence of fourteen sonnets, because of space reasons this is not possible. Therefore, we will only focus on three of them, the third, the eighth and last one. This choice allows us to see, at least to a certain extent, the progress of the sonnet sequences in the development of the theme of hope, longing and the "multi-layered conception of romantic love" (Bocher).

#### Sonnet n. 3

"O ombre vane, fuor che ne l'aspetto!"<sup>11</sup> -- DANTE.

"Immaginata guida la conduce."<sup>12</sup> -- PETRARCA.

I 'dream of 'you to 'wake: would 'that I 'might	a
Dream 'of you 'and not 'wake but 'slumber 'on;	b

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<sup>11</sup> "O shades, unreal save in outward show!" (*Purgatorio*, II, 79)

<sup>12</sup> "An imagined guide conducts her" ("S'Amor novo consiglio non n'apporta," 9)

Nor 'find with 'dreams the 'dear com'panion 'gone,	b
As 'Summer 'ended 'Summer 'birds take 'flight.	a
In 'happy 'dreams I 'hold you 'full in 'sight,	a
I 'blush a'gain who 'waking 'look so 'wan;	b
Brigh'ter than 'sunniest 'day that 'ever 'shone,	b
In 'happy 'dreams your 'smile makes 'day of 'night.	a
Thus 'only 'in a 'dream we 'are at 'one,	c
Thus 'only 'in a 'dream we 'give and 'take	d
The 'faith that 'maketh 'rich who 'take or 'give;	e
If 'thus to 'sleep is 'sweeter 'than to 'wake,	d
To 'die were 'surely 'sweeter 'than to 'live,	e
Though 'there be 'nothing 'new be'neath the 'sun.	c

(Rossetti 295)

The third sonnet of the sequence points at an impossible love in which the lovers can only be together during the dreams of the female speaker.

Petrarch's and Dante's quotes introduce the idea of the spiritual union of the lovers. Dante's phrase "O ombre vane, fuor che ne l'aspetto!" suggest the incorporeal relationship that C. Rossetti will develop through the images of dreams. In the second song of the Purgatory from which this quote is taken Dante wants to hug his friend Casella but is unable to since he is dead. The same happens to the female narrator of this poem, for she sees her lover but cannot touch him since he is not real, he is just part of her dream. On the other hand, Petrarch's "Immaginata guida" conducts the soul of CCLXXVII sonnet's speaker through life because the poetic I has no destination nor aim, but grief. This might be equalled to the memories the female speaker in C. Rossetti's poem that make her long to live in her dreams because her life is too painful without him.

The octave introduces the problem of the impossibility for the two lovers to be together except during her dreams since he is no longer with her. Furthermore, the poetic I expresses her feelings of anguish and angst, her dissatisfaction because he is "gone".

As the poetic 'I' tells us in the first quatrain, her "dear companion" has gone away "As Summer ended Summer birds take flight", perhaps as if nothing else tied him to that place or even to her. The reiteration of the word "Summer" itself reinforces the powerful imagery of the past warm and happy days, which accompanies the imagery of birds and freedom of the simile. When she wakes up, she feels his absence, thus she would rather sleep forever and live in her oneiric world with him, than to face the reality in which he is no longer part of her life.

In the second quatrain, the use of the parallelism “in happy dreams” in lines five and eight rounds the sense of what happens during those dreams in which the lovers are together. The female narrator evokes the feelings that he provokes in her, the happiness highlighted by the simile of the sunny day “Brighter than sunniest day that ever shone”, and how her cheeks “blush again”. But when waking up, this emotion disappears and they become paler than usual “who waking look so wan”. She goes farther and loses herself in the moment when she is with him, “In happy dreams your smile makes day of night”, no longer caring if it is day or night.

The sestet however tries to solve the problem proposed in the octave concluding that their only possibility to be together is “in a dream” and suggesting death as a solution for her unfortunate suffering. However, she does not seem very certain about this being the right choice “Though there be nothing new beneath the sun”. Thus, there is no reconciliation at the end, the problem is left unsolved, with us readers wondering what will she do.

The sestet begins indicating that her dream is the only place in which they can be together and be “at one”, in which they “give and take / The faith that maketh rich who take or give”. This faith might both refer to the faith they have in each other, highlighting the importance of this spiritual love the lovers share, and to the religious faith, which is not surprising since “[m]ost of Christina Rossetti's poetry has some sort of underlying religious or spiritual theme” (Womble).

The sonnet turns at the twelfth line, discussing the idea that dying would be better than living because she does not like her life without him: “If thus to sleep is sweeter than to wake, / To die were surely sweeter than to live”, though she knows that this way there would be no more surprises or excitement, “nothing new beneath the sun”. As Cody points out, “[t]hemes of frustrated love and an understated tension between desire and renunciation characterize her more serious work”. As in this case, the separated lover experiences a “regret for life unfulfilled” and “death wish” which however is not conclusive (Cody). These themes of death and tragic love were quite common in Victorian poetry (Healey), and in C. Rossetti love is usually “turned inexorably” to death (Bowra). If the narrator cannot live with her beloved, it may be better to die. “The process of renunciation” in this case of life “serves as the climax to many of her best love poems” (Harrison). Since this situation makes the narrator miserable, “[s]he longs for rest so



intensely that she thinks of death as ... a blessed gateway”, as a “means of escape” although her fear of death makes her hesitate (Fairchild).

The tone that C. Rossetti employs in this poem is, at times, urging and loud. This can be seen in the intensifications expressed through the enjambment of the first and second lines, when she expresses her wish to be with him during her dreams “would that I might / Dream of you and not wake but slumber on;”; or the one in lines ten and eleven, when she refers to the sharing of faith which will enrich them “Thus only in a dream we give and take / The faith that maketh rich who take or give;”. At the same time, the anaphorical use of “thus” at the beginning of the sestet and the parallelism of “only in a dream” contributes to this sense of intensity. At times however, the tone is calm and soft, expressing a nostalgic mood as when she remembers the power of his smile “In happy dreams your smile makes day of night”; or the idea of sweetness in dreaming and dying at the end of the sestet “If thus to sleep is sweeter than to wake, / To die were surely sweeter than to live;”. The regularity of the iambic pentameter contributes to the pace, which varies from a sweet creeping to a sedately jogging according to the tone used.

The use she makes of punctuation is rather thorough, the only lines without punctuation being the enjambments already mentioned. In fact, semicolons and full stops prevail over colons and force us to make a compulsory and solemn pause so that the idea expressed does not go without being noticed and we can take our time to appreciate its relevance.

Regarding the texture, the poem weaves its sounds into plosive and sibilant sounds, although they are not densely close-packed. The plosives contribute to the sense of urging and the power of her desires, whereas the sibilants contribute to the dreamy atmosphere.

The most important imagery however is that of dreams, reiterated in half of the lines of the poem, in opposition to waking which is also abundant. This antithesis is very powerful in the poem, the contrast between reality and the oneiric world, the memories and the present, which is reinforced by other antithesis such as “day” and “night” in the 8<sup>th</sup> line, and “die” and “live” in the 13<sup>th</sup>.

This poem might be summarized as an expression of a great longing for a love which is no longer possible but while the poetic I’s dreams, which despairs since she does not enjoy her life anymore.

Sonnet n. 8

"Come dicesse a Dio: D'altro non calme."<sup>13</sup>--DANTE.

"Spero trovar pieta non che perdono."<sup>14</sup>-- PETRARCA.

"I, 'if I 'perish, 'perish" <sup>15</sup> —'Esther 'spake:	a
And 'bride of 'life or 'death she 'made her 'fair	b
In 'all the 'lustre 'of her 'perfumed 'hair	b
And 'smiles that 'kindle 'longing 'but to 'slake.	a
She 'put on 'pomp of 'loveli'ness, to 'take	a
Her 'husband 'through his 'eyes at 'una'ware;	b
She 'spread a'broad her 'beauty 'for a 'snare,	b
Harm'less as 'doves and 'subtle 'as a 'snake.	a
She 'trapped him 'with one 'mesh of 'silken 'hair,	c
She 'vanquished 'him by 'wisdom 'of her 'wit,	d
And 'built her 'people's 'house that 'it should 'stand:--	e
If 'I might 'take my 'life so 'in my 'hand,	e
And 'for my 'love to 'Love put 'up my 'prayer,	d
And 'for love's 'sake by 'Love be 'granted 'it!	c

(Rossetti 298)

The eighth sonnet deals with Esther's biblical story, in which her wit is praised for convincing her husband, the King, to save her people through her woman's charms.

In this poem, the quotes by Dante and Petrarch might serve to introduce the idea of Esther's determination and her hope to be forgiven. The first quote by Dante "Come dicesse a Dio: D'altro non calme" refers to the soul Dante sees in the VII song of the Purgatory which has raised its hands as in a prayer. This might be related, according to the previous argument, to Esther's prayers before finding the courage to face her husband the king and risk her life in order to save her people. On the other hand, this quote may also refer to the narrator instead of Esther, for she is also thinking of risking her life and hopes God will forgive her as he forgave Esther. Petrarch's quote "Spero trovar pieta non che perdono" which might be related to Esther's expectation of obtaining the King's piety and forgiveness for her audacity when interrupting him and trying to convince him to release her people when he himself had previously ordered their destruction.

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<sup>13</sup> "As if he said to God: 'I care for nothing else'" (*Purgatorio*, VIII, 12)

<sup>14</sup> "I hope to find pity, and not only pardon" ("Voi ch' ascoltate in rime sparse il suono," 8)

<sup>15</sup> Esther 4:16. Esther married Ahasuerus, the King of Persia at a time when the Jews' situation was difficult in his kingdom, for the counsellor Hamman instigated the King to order the destruction of the Jewish people. During a feast, Esther confessed she was Jewish and asked for protection for herself and her people, risking her life because she was not announced when she spoke to Ahasuerus, and as a woman, her deed was considered an offense towards the King. Eventually, she got Ahasuerus' protection thanks to her beauty and persuasion power, and his counsellor Hamman was condemned because of treason.

The octave presents Esther's courage and her tactic to persuade her husband of saving the Jewish people, while the sestet confirms her success and the poetic I compares herself with her, wondering if she would be able to risk her life in the same way for her love to God and if so if she would also be forgiven.

The first quatrain begins with Esther's words "I, if I perish, perish", which express her determination to die in the attempt to obtain her aim. The narrator of this poem describes her impressions about Esther's deed, how the wife of the Persian king "bride of life or death" could be killed for her daring. This antithesis serves to illustrate Esther's uncertain fate. The narrator, by using an enjambment, also describes how she made herself look beautiful "she made her fair / In all the lustre of her perfumed hair" in order to achieve her aim. Not only does she look beautiful but also gentle and uses her captivating "smiles" to enchant him and provoke passion in him "kindle longing but to slake" so that afterwards she may calm him.

The second quatrain continues with this idea of her charming him because of her beauty: "She put on pomp of loveliness" in order to manipulate him "to take / Her husband through his eyes at unaware" so she can get away with it. The enjambment here contributes to this sense of unexpectedness. Esther shows up and displays her beauty in front of the king's guests "She spread abroad her beauty" which was prohibited for women to do in order to set the king a trap. The narrator compares Esther to "harmless doves" highlighting her apparent innocence, beauty and purity, but also to a "subtle snake" referring to her astuteness.

The *volta* or turn provides us with the confirmation of Esther's plan's success, for "She trapped him" and the reiteration of the use of her feminine charms for this purpose "with one mesh of silken hair". However, there is a change since the narrator now tells us that her beauty was not the only factor contributing to her success, but that "She vanquished him by wisdom of her wit". Thus, her intelligence is praised for building "her people's house that it should stand" and achieving the king's permission for the Jews to live in Persia and not be persecuted anymore. In addition, the soft use of fricative sounds in the octave and this tercet provide these parts of the sonnet focused on Esther a texture that contributes to the sense of Esther's charming of the King by the movement of her hair and herself, which is also emphasized by the regular use of the iambic pentameter.

The last tercet, however, introduces a change of theme. The poetic I does no longer speak of Esther but of herself, who wonders what would happen to her if she risked her life as Esther did: “If I might take my life so in my hand”. Then, she asks for Love’s love, for pure and spiritual love, identifying this capital letter Love with God as it is suggested in the following line: “And for my love to Love put up my prayer, / And for the love’s sake by Love be granted it!”. It may be argued that the narrator does not see herself as “a match to Esther’s intelligence, strength, and beauty”, and thus what she hopes to achieve is “a match in her love for God” (Alarabi 212). Although she is expressing a strong desire, emphasized by the exclamation mark at the end, her request seems ambiguous as it is expressed in a conditional clause form.

As we have already mentioned, C. Rossetti revises the themes of religious and romantic love in the sonnets of this sequence. Her “love poetry, however, explores another topical space – that of human relationships” (Bocher). Here, Esther’s love for her people is greater than that of her life. In this poem we thus have both religious and patriotic love.

Bearing in mind that religion influenced much of her works, we could also argue that in this case this poem “came out of the personal experience with scripture” (Womble). In this case, C. Rossetti praises Esther’s value, she seems to be fascinated by her deed, just as Ahasuerus and the female speaker are. C. Rossetti, as Christine de Pizan in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, rewrites a Jewish Christian myth from a woman’s point of view and thus contributing to maintain Esther’s figure’s relevance, hence also women’s.

The tone employed in this poem could be defined as admiring when referring to Esther and doubtful and exclamatory at the end of the sonnet, for the last line ends with an exclamation mark expressing her hope to be granted her prayer, which indeed she is not sure to achieve.

The syntax and punctuation in this sonnet are also thoroughly chosen, for each quatrain end in a full stop, emphasizing the idea of independent units. It is relevant however to highlight the change in connectors compared to the previous one, since here the anaphorical use of the plain conjunction “and” at the beginning of lines two, four, eleven, thirteen and fourteen contrast with the rather formal diction. Additionally, it is worth mentioning the punctuation of the eleventh line, two dashes after a colon that clearly indicate a change, a compulsory stop which coincides with the change to the first person singular use of the poetic I.

The imagery, of which the most outstanding is that of Esther's beauty and feminine charms. As we have already mentioned in the analysis of each stanza, there are several allusions to her loveliness as "her fair" in the second line, "the lustre of her perfumed hair" in the third line, "smiles" in the fourth line, "pomp on loveliness" in the fifth line, "her beauty" in the seventh and "silken hair" in the ninth. In addition, the similes of the eighth line refer to her (apparent) character: "harmless as doves" portrays her purity and innocence in contrast to that of the "snake", which refers to her astuteness. We may highlight here the reversal of the snake image, usually related to the original sin and therefore bearing negative connotations, which in this case is a positive compliment of Esther's wisdom. Moreover, C. Rossetti expresses, contrary to common belief, that femininity is not an impediment for intelligence.

Nevertheless, there are other images as well. For instance, that of the king being thirsty of Esther in "slake" in the 4<sup>th</sup> line; or that of the tricks such as "a snare" in the seventh line and Esther's hair's trap in the ninth line, "she trapped him with one mesh of silken hair". Lastly, the use of the word "abroad" in the seventh line highlights Esther's situation of emigration, for she is Jewish, coming from Israel, and now lives in Persia.

This poetic I therefore reflects her longing for Esther's courage, who risks her life in order to save the ones she loves; for her intelligence and lastly for God's love.

#### Sonnet n. 14

"E la Sua Volontade e nostra pace."<sup>16</sup>-- DANTE.

"Sol con questi pensier, con altre chiome."<sup>17</sup>-- PETRARCA.

Youth 'gone, and 'beauty 'gone if 'ever 'there	a
Dwelt 'beauty 'in so 'poor a 'face as 'this;	b
Youth 'gone and 'beauty, 'what re'mains of 'bliss?	b
I 'will not 'bind fresh 'roses 'in my 'hair,	a
To 'shame a 'cheek at 'best but 'little 'fair,--	a
Leave 'youth his 'roses, 'who can 'bear a 'thorn,--	c
I 'will not 'seek for 'blossoms 'any'where,	a
Ex'cept such 'common 'flowers as 'blow with 'corn.	c
Youth 'gone and 'beauty 'gone, what 'doth 'remain?	d
The 'longing 'of a 'heart pent 'up for'lorn,	c
A 'silent 'heart whose 'silence 'loves and 'longs;	e
The 'silence 'of a 'heart which 'sang its 'songs	e
While 'youth and 'beauty 'made a 'summer 'morn,	c

<sup>16</sup> "And His Will is our peace" (*Paradiso*, III, 85)

<sup>17</sup> "Alone with these same thoughts, with time-changed locks" ("Giovene donna sotto un verde lauro", 32).

Si'lence of 'love that 'cannot 'sing a'gain.

d

(Rossetti 301)

The last sonnet of the sequence revolves around the idea of aging and no longer being beautiful<sup>18</sup> nor blissful, but silent and longing, even though the poetic I questions her ever being beautiful.

The quotes by Dante and Petrarch introduce the idea of aging and finding in God's word the peace to endure the sombre days of old age. Dante's quote "E la Sua Volontade e nostra pace" refers to the shade of a dead nun Dante speaks with in the Paradise song, who resigns herself to the place God has given her. In the same way, the poetic I has to resign herself to aging and find in God's will the peace, as C. Rossetti herself did. The line "Sol con questi pensier, con altre chiome" belonging to Petrarch's poem "Giovene donna sotto un verde lauro" seems to refer to Petrarch who thinks about a girl he saw under the laurel earlier, and in spite of time still does. Through this quote, C. Rossetti points at to the theme of aging and everlasting love.

In this sonnet, the octave presents the doubt of what happens in old age by employing a rhetorical question in each quatrain and reiterating the idea of no longer being beautiful nor young, whereas the sestet answers these question in a rather pessimistic way.

The first quatrain begins with the idea of aging and losing beauty "Youth gone, and beauty gone" and the enjambment in which the poetic I questions if she ever was beautiful "if ever there / Dwelt beauty in so poor a face as this". The idea of losing beauty and youth is reiterated almost with a parallelism "Youth gone and beauty" and it is followed by the first rhetorical question: "what remains of bliss?". The last line of this quatrain "I will not bind fresh roses in my hair" again points out to her aging and therefore not feeling appropriate to, as young girls do, bind roses to her hair since they symbolise youth and beauty.

The second quatrain appears connected to the previous one, for only a comma divides them. Here the idea of no binding roses to her hair is justified, since they would "shame a cheek at best but little fair,--" because of the contrast with the colour of her cheeks, which would not seem so blushed in comparison with the red colour of the roses. The use

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<sup>18</sup> According to Alarabi (see references), Christina Rossetti's illness around 1871 (Grave's disease) which left her deformed influences the reiterative idea of "beauty gone".

of the dashes here is relevant, for it forces a larger pause and it separates this line from the following lines. The sixth line presents a metaphor, “Leave youth his roses, who can bear a thorn,--”, perhaps signalling Christ’s thorn crown. Here again, the importance of this line is emphasized by the use of dashes. It is also remarkable the fact that youth is related to a male persona by the use of the 3rd person singular possessive adjective “his”. The poetic I then concludes that she “will not seek for blossoms anywhere / Except such common flowers as blow with corn”, thus we may argue she will only accept flowers such as poppies, which are so fragile but do not last so long, for they fly away before having time to wither.

The first tercet begins with the parallelism of the first line of the octave: “Youth gone and beauty gone”, reiterating once again the aging and asking another rhetorical question, more general this time in which emptiness seems to be suggested: “what doth remain?”. The female speaker answers herself in the following line with the personification of the heart instead of referring to herself: “The longing of a heart pent up forlorn”. After realizing she has aged and lost her beauty, she expresses her sadness and her impossibility to express her love by means of another personification, of the silence this time: “A silent heart whose silence loves and longs;” taking us back again to Petrarch’s quote.

The last tercet resumes the idea of the personification of silence from the previous line: “The silence of a heart which sang its songs / While youth and beauty made a summer morn”. It seems as if the joy and the singing mood of that heart has faded away with age, and now that silence replaces the songs which used to express love once: “Silence of love that cannot sing again”. Here love is the personified element. Although Alarabi argues that “the silence here is voluntary rather than compulsory”, it seems to me that the poetic I experiences an incapacity to express her joy in her maturity due to her acquiescence (215).

As we can see, the tone of the poem seems quite pessimistic. In fact, C. Rossetti’s biographer Jones defines this last sonnet as “one of her bleakest productions”, since the speaker shows little or no hope for the future (142). However, we may also argue that the poetic I is accepting that aging and dying are inevitable parts of life due to the reiteration of the words “silence”, “longing” and “song”, and thus the tone becomes serene.

Its mood, on the other hand, could be defined as “sombre and autumnal”, as her other biographer Thomas defines the whole sequence in which “mature and reflective love” is

developed (216). This sonnet, as the previous ones, conveys the idea of “that obstinate longing for something lost out of life which was characteristic of C. Rossetti’s poetry” (Jones 117). This particular sonnet, as suggested, may deal with the longing of the vivacity and innocence of the past, of a younger age.

We can notice the subtle use of fricatives in the octave, resembling the blowing of the wind over the flowers’ petals, the passing of time, which is also represented by the rhythm and meter. However, the sestet emphasizes sibilant sounds and the liquid one, stressing the importance of “love”, “longing” and “song”, this last one related to the happiness of past days.

This sonnet may thus deal with the awareness of growing old and no longer being beautiful nor joyful. And therefore, the female speaker decides to keep silence and unhappily long for the past days to come back.

### **Conclusion**

As it has been suggested, these three sonnets are linked through the several expressions of the themes of love, longing and hope which provide the unnamed ladies an active role in the troubadours’ world. On the one hand, love has been portrayed as a refuge of reality in the oneiric world in the third sonnet; as a greater love towards one’s people than towards one’s own life in the eighth sonnet; and as feeling which can no longer be expressed in maturity in the last sonnet. Longing, on the other hand, has been reflected as a desire for either an eternal life in a dream or for death in the third sonnet; for Esther’s love for her people, her intelligence, and God’s love in the eighth; and for the bliss and singing of youth in the fourteenth. Finally, the decrease of hope has also been represented, from the unacceptance of reality, to the doubt and the final acceptance of reality.

Before ending this paper, I would like to quote the last lines of the last sonnet: “A silent heart whose silence loves and longs; / The silence of a heart which sang its songs” in order to remind C. Rossetti’s readers that we can still hear her silence, her heart singing, and that the echo of her voice will not yet disappear.



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## Appendix

More publications by Christina Rossetti:

- *Commonplace and Other Stories* (1870).
- *Sing Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book* (1871).
- *Annus Domini: A Prayer for Each Day of the Year, Founded on a Text of Holy Scripture* (1874)
- *Speaking Likeness* (1874).
- *Seek and Find: A Double Series of Short Studies of the Benedicite* (1879).
- *A Pageant and Other Poems* (1881).
- *Called to Be Saints: The Minor Festivals Devotionally Studied* (1881).
- *The Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse* (1892).