

CHALLENGING THE STEREOTYPE OF THE IDEALIZED VICTORIAN MOTHER
THROUGH THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF MATERNAL MENTAL HEALTH IN
CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S *SING-SONG: A NURSERY RHYME BOOK* (1872)

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ABSTRACT**CHALLENGING THE STEREOTYPE OF THE IDEALIZED VICTORIAN MOTHER THROUGH THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF MATERNAL MENTAL HEALTH IN CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S *SING-SONG: A NURSERY RHYME BOOK* (1872)**

Laura Mungham

In this thesis I argue that *Sing-Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book* (1872) disrupts conventional narratives of the idealized maternal role in the Victorian era, “the angel in the house” by confronting and giving a voice to the often overlooked realities of maternal suffering. Rossetti accomplishes this by fostering the conversation regarding the challenges inherent in motherhood. *Sing-Song* has been dismissed by critics as inappropriate for its intended child audience. However, such assessments rely on outdated assumptions and fail to recognize the intention behind the poetry collection. The subtle coding of the rhymes for a maternal audience has largely been overlooked. Rossetti deliberately represents the psychological and emotional complexities of motherhood, offering a more realistic portrayal of the mental health challenges that may accompany the maternal experience. In turn, *Sing-Song* challenges the idealized mother figure of the Victorian era and represents a more nuanced understanding of motherhood.

Keywords: motherhood, idealized, maternal mental health, the angel in the house, infant death

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I dedicate this thesis to the impactful mother figures in my life: to my own mother, who has been the guiding light on my journey through motherhood and who continues to shine brightly in the lives of my children. To my maternal grandmother “Nanny,” who instilled a deep and lasting love as a mother and grandmother through the generations of our family. Lastly, to my paternal grandmother “Nanny,” who loved deeply and struggled silently. Your stories, though often unspoken, have shaped the generations that followed.

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Sworn Into Silence: Maternal Mental Health and the Silenced Struggles of Motherhood

When I became a mother and experienced postpartum anxiety, I recognized the lack of conversation surrounding a mother's mental health. The likelihood of experiencing postpartum psychological challenges did not seem to be common knowledge but rather a secret society that the individual had to be sworn into. The requirements of this initiation included intrusive thoughts, heightened anxiety triggered by the sound of a crying baby, and obsessive concerns about the safety of baby products, such as wondering whether a specific lotion could be harmful as suggested by its warning label. Despite seeking guidance from therapists, doctors, pregnancy and postpartum literature, and other mothers, after the fact, I found no prior warning about these experiences. Instead, when I voiced my struggles, the response was often a dismissive "it's normal." I soon began to question what constitutes normalcy for new mothers and why there appeared to be a lack of resources to help prepare mothers for these challenges. The confusion about what constitutes normalcy on the topic of a mother who is struggling led me to recognize the mother in Christina Rossetti's *Sing-Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book* (1872). These poems on infant death and the accompanying illustrations depicting a struggling mother were shocking to see in a children's poetry book. I questioned why Rossetti would present a struggling mother in such a way in a collection that was advertised to children. It became evident that Rossetti's audience extended beyond just children; she was decoding the realistic experience of motherhood for the mother reading the book of rhymes to their child.

Throughout my investigation of the mother of the Victorian era and how she is portrayed in Rossetti's *Sing-Song*, I found there to be a gap in the research on *Sing-Song* as compared to Rossetti's other poetry. This can be seen through search results from Google Scholar using the query "Sing Song" Rossetti, reviewing these to examine the theme of motherhood and childhood in Christina Rossetti's *Sing-Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book*. While the intention was to locate peer-reviewed sources, the search results may have included duplicate entries, works in which the terms are mentioned but not central, and a combination of both scholarly and non-scholarly materials due to the limitations of Google Scholar's search and filtering functions.

The graph below (see figure 1) further compares Google Scholar search result counts for selected works by Christina Rossetti, based on the queries "Goblin Market" Rossetti, "Prince's Progress" Rossetti, and "Sing Song" Rossetti. The data indicates that *Goblin Market* (1862) yields approximately 4,300 results, while *The Prince's Progress* (1866) returns about 4,700. In contrast, *Sing-Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book* generates only approximately 1,020 results, suggesting a relatively lower level of scholarly attention.

These results represent just how little has been analyzed when it comes to *Sing-Song*, specifically regarding the poems on the topic of motherhood and infant death depicted in the second graph below (see figure 2). The importance of Rossetti's depiction of the mother in her poetry book has not yet been extensively studied and this will be addressed through my reading of the poems in the thesis.

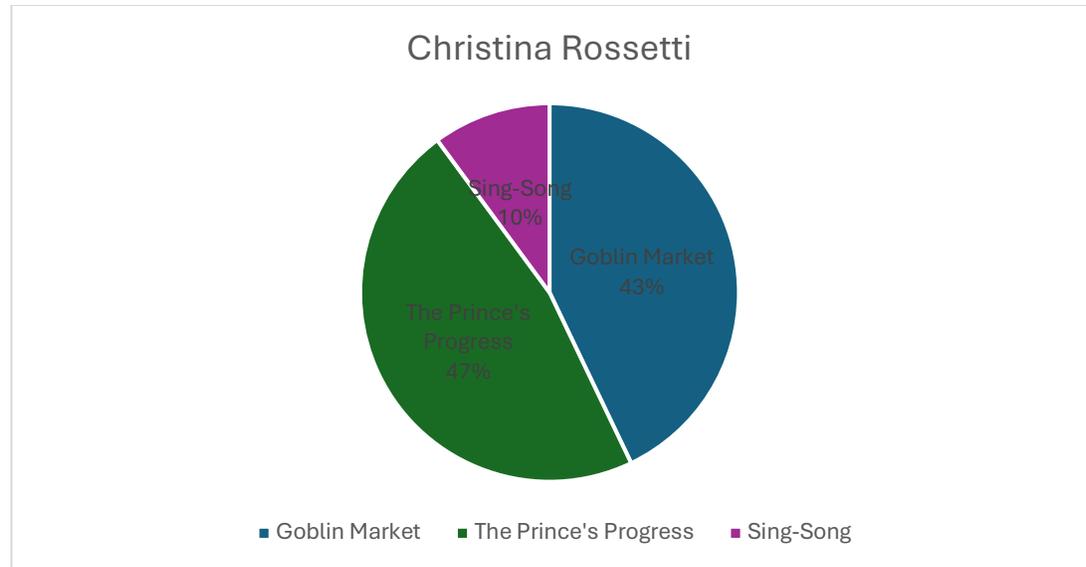


Figure 1. A representation of the number of articles available on Christina Rossetti's poetry through a search of Google Scholar (March 2025)

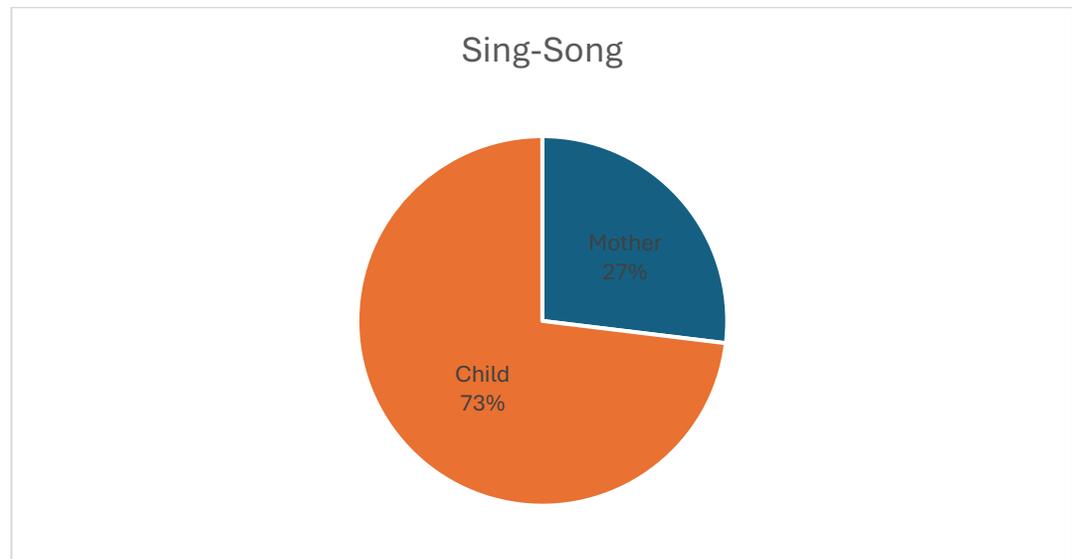


Figure 2. A representation of the number of articles available on Christina Rossetti's *Sing-Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book* on the topic of the mother and the child through a search of Google Scholar (March 2025)

The lack of research and analysis pertaining to *Sing-Song* as a whole likely arises because the collection represents nursery tale literature. The scarcity of research articles that acknowledged the way in which mother was portrayed throughout the poems in *Sing-*

Song suggest that this topic may have been overlooked due to the genre of the work. As seen in figure 2, scholarly articles available on the topic of the child¹ in *Sing-Song* outnumber articles that examine the mother.² Rossetti was not unique to her time in her writing on motherhood, specifically in focusing on infant death. Infant death became a popular subject matter through child elegies written by female poets in the nineteenth century, such as Lydia Huntley Sigourney, Elizabeth Drew Barstow Stoddard, and Charlotte Mary Mew (Brooks-Motl). What distinguishes Rossetti from these specific poets in the child-elegy genre is her ability to focus the poem on the mother. She effectively presents the psychological trauma associated with the loss of an infant as a recognizable and human experience for a child audience, while subtly encoding messages intended for a maternal audience.

Although the child-elegy had a place of its own in the world of literature during the Victorian era (Brooks-Motl), Rossetti's interpretation of maternal emotions in relation to experiencing the death of one's infant was not something that was well-received among critics later in the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century. It is evident in the critiques of *Sing-Song* that interpretations of the mother have been overlooked. Critics who have focused on *Sing-Song* have expressed a curious dislike of poems that acknowledged infant death and the mother as the main focus.³ It appeared to be a consensual decision that these topics were not appropriate to include in a children's nursery rhyme book. The idea that such subjects were inappropriate stood out to me because Rossetti was portraying what I saw to be a realistic view of a mother's emotions;

¹ Approximately 880 articles available on GoogleScholar on "childhood" in *Sing-Song*.

² Approximately 350 articles available on GoogleScholar regarding "motherhood" in *Sing-Song*.

³ Carmichael 1885, Colvin 1869, Cutter 1925, Bellas 1977, Kooistra 2006, Wakely-Mulroney et al. 2018

further, the critics had also missed the mark that *Sing-Song* was written for the maternal audience, rather than just a child audience. In my thesis I will argue that the poems in *Sing-Song* that are said to be geared toward the child are also coded for the mother reading the poems to the child.

Recent discourse surrounding maternal mental health has gained significant attention, particularly as public figures have begun sharing their personal struggles with the complexities of motherhood. Celebrities such as Serena Williams, Kylie Jenner, and Alanis Morissette have contributed to conversations about postpartum depression and anxiety (Moran). Additionally, children's television shows such as *Bluey* (“The Show”), acknowledge their parental audience by addressing the topic of miscarriage in a manner that is likely to resonate with mothers (Niazi). “The Show” episode, widely recognized by parents, exemplifies the growing visibility of postpartum struggles among mothers. While the acknowledgment of such difficulties may result in fear of judgement of not upholding the ideal of a “good mother” for experiencing difficulties, the increasing openness of these discussions across media platforms, among women, celebrities, and in popular culture can, I believe, help diminish the stigma that associates maternal hardship with maternal failure. In my first impression of Christina Rossetti’s *Sing-Song*, I perceived a similar message. Through her depictions of maternal grief and the accompanying illustrations, Rossetti presents a portrayal of motherhood that transcends the idealized image of the perfect, joyful mother. *Sing-Song* contributes to the ongoing dialogue surrounding motherhood by representing the emotional complexities of the maternal experience. Through its portrayal of a mother’s feelings, *Sing-Song* acknowledges that motherhood is not uniformly characterized by happiness but rather reflects the ups-and-

downs that exist in the daily routines of maternal parenting. Victorian ideals generally express that a woman was specifically born to come into the role of a mother, and that although struggle was a reality – it was not to be openly discussed. A mother was expected to thrive in the private domestic sphere in order to express total control and happiness in her role as a wife and mother in her home (Alfano 2023, Armstrong 2022, Langland 1992, Maika 2011, Marland 2012, Murdoch 2013, Murray 1982, Neff 1832, Regaignon 2013, Rosenman 2008, Scott 1988, Sickbert 1993, Wagner 2020, Wallis 2020, Whig.) In turn, this perception creates a distorted perception of the realities surrounding the emotional challenges that a mother may face.

While researching the middle-class mother in nineteenth-century advice manuals (see Appendix A), I noticed that the conversation often placed blame on a mother for experiencing mental health struggles in motherhood. Advice manuals were an important source of information about women and parenting (Niiranen). Medical advice that focused on guidance in motherhood largely consisted in such manuals, often written by male medical practitioners, pastors, as well as female authors.⁴ These advice manuals were geared toward new mothers when faced with any questions on the topic of pregnancy, birth, infant death, and child rearing. Often when mental health struggles were mentioned, prayer was the solution that was offered. “Do you say it is impossible always to govern one’s feelings? There is one method a never-failing one – prayer” (Child 3). These manuals tend to place blame on the mother if the health, or the obedience of their child was not manageable through the advice offered by the manual. The lack of acknowledgement of difficulties a mother could face did not match up to how Rossetti

⁴ See Appendix A for full list of advice manuals consulted for this thesis.

was portraying mental hardships in her nineteenth-century text, *Sing-Song*. The manuals, which focused on how to allow the child and mother to thrive, lacked recognition of the struggling mother. These manuals definitely had a missing element. The information I was exposed to prior to experiencing difficulties during the postpartum period was little to none. These Victorian manuals ignored this very common struggle among mothers, thereby silencing the conversation pertaining to postpartum mental health.

Although there was some mention of postpartum struggles during the nineteenth century, for example in the short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1901) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman who depicts a mother experiencing psychosis just after the birth of her child, mental health struggles experienced by mothers were often hidden. Postpartum depression during the nineteenth century was often something to be feared as it was referred to as “mental derangement” (Wallis) and often the mother was sent to an asylum to heal (Bennett 605). The way in which postpartum is presented in *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) and amongst medical professionals as some sort of mental derangement creates a narrative that a struggling mother should be hidden away so as to not reveal maternal struggles in the public sphere of motherhood. The secrecy differs from how Rossetti portrayed a mother in *Sing-Song*. She includes illustrations of mothers expressing emotions of sadness and struggle. Rossetti acknowledged hardship and made it a main topic, creating a place to normalize the notion of a struggling mother. Although advertised as a child’s nursery rhyme book, *Sing-Song* was coded to reach the mother reader through poetry and illustrations. Thus, *Sing-Song* not only acted as a form of comfort for a struggling mother, but it could also help acknowledge that hardships throughout motherhood were normal.

The mother who was idealized during the Victorian era was expected to suppress her emotions and to radiate the persona of someone who would always uphold composure and emotional stability. The representation of a struggling mother in Christina Rossetti's *Sing-Song* acknowledges and humanizes the mother by exposing the adversity that motherhood can create in terms of a woman's emotional wellbeing. *Sing-Song* acknowledges a full range of emotions for a mother experiencing hardship, such as the death of her infant. Little research has been conducted on how the mother in *Sing-Song* challenges the idealized mother figure of the Victorian era. I suggest that Rossetti's representation of a mother in *Sing-Song* does not represent or support the idealized mother figure, but rather, Rossetti humanizes the mother in her poems to represent a realistic image of the mother figure to both the child listener and an adult audience.

Throughout the Victorian era, there were distinct roles that men and women followed to conform to be a part of the nineteenth-century ideals of social behaviour. According to Vandana Whig in "Victorian Society and Gender Stereotypes" it was a commonplace for the man to work and provide financially for the family, while it was the woman's responsibility to be the lead caregiver for the home and any children they might have (Whig 105). These roles resulted in the man existing in the public sphere entailed in working outside of the home, while the woman lived and functioned in the private sphere of the home. The private sphere was a woman's domain, therefore a place where a mother was expected to thrive (Whig 105). It is evident that with this preconception, it would be considered unacceptable to appear to be struggling within this role. Whig writes that "these gender stereotypes were reinforced through various societal norms, including the 'angel in the house' archetype" (Whig 105).

The image of an idealized mother and wife is described in Coventry Patmore's well-known poem "The Angel in the House" (1854), focusing on a woman who encapsulates the qualities of the ideal wife, also suggesting that the ultimate form of domestic fulfillment for a woman is to tend to her husband and home. "Man must be pleased; but him to please / Is woman's pleasure" (Patmore 9.1-2). Patmore positions a woman's primary role as attending to her husband's happiness. Patmore's poem overlooks a woman's significance as an individual with needs and feelings of her own. The "Angel in the House" fails to recognize a wife and mother as a person with her own distinct needs. I argue that the unrealistic notion which suggests that a woman's life is fulfilled solely through her husband's happiness can be linked to the development of an idealized mother figure that existed during the Victorian era.

Given the importance of the image of "the angel in the house" among women during the Victorian era, "Guidebook literature" (Niiranen) became a popular read among women in the nineteenth century. These guidebooks offered advice on all aspects of the maternal domestic world. Advice manuals during the nineteenth century were advertised to women in order to address any doubts or questions they might have regarding motherhood, child-rearing, and other domestic roles that a woman faced during this time (Niiranen). These manuals were written by male physicians, religious leaders, and female activists. The range of authors thus presents diverse perspectives on advice on motherhood available during the nineteenth century. It can be argued that these manuals exemplify the lack of advice specifically pertaining to the mental health of the mother during the Victorian era. I will be supporting my ideas with excerpts from these manuals to show how they positioned the mother as a person who upheld ideals of perfection.

While other critics invoke Patmore's term, "the angel in the house," the idealized mother figure is the term I will use to pertain to a mother who seemingly flourishes in all aspects of motherhood. I will also analyze how *Sing-Song* presents a mother who acknowledges mental challenges faced in motherhood, such as the emotions experienced as a result of an event such as infant death. I will argue that Rossetti does not expect the mother in her poetry to uphold the idealized mother figure of the Victorian era; rather she humanizes her and offers space for hardship within her experience.

I propose that Rossetti's *Sing-Song* is a book of poems that speaks to two audiences, the child and the mother. Rossetti's poetry is accompanied by pre-Raphaelite artist Arthur Hughes' illustrations that bring these two audiences together. Through the words of Rossetti, and the illustrations by Hughes, we see a mother demonstrating realistic emotions regarding the hardship of infant death. Infant death was a common occurrence during this era (Jallad 1996, Vallone 2000, Paris 2003, Gubar 2005, Seaton 2017, Gryctko 2020). The partnership of illustration and poetry comes together to create a space in which the mother is humanized by acknowledging her emotions, rather than hiding them to uphold the idealized mother figure. The portrayal of emotional adversity to a child audience focuses attention on emotional hardship, thereby bringing normalcy to mental health struggles.

Awareness of the emotional struggle of a mother can be seen in Rossetti's poems titled "A Baby's Cradle with No Baby in It", "Motherless Baby, and Babyless Mother", "Angels at the Foot of the Bed", and "Why Did Baby Die?". The acknowledgement seen in these titles regarding an emotionally struggling mother was not widely seen in the portrayal of a mother in the advice manuals of the nineteenth century. I will explore

critics' views on the topic of maternal emotions that accompany infant death, and how they were portrayed in relation to the appropriateness of what were considered to be acceptable topics for children's literature.

Through the illustrations and poetry of *Sing-Song*, I will analyze Rossetti's ability to create a space for the representation of hardships in motherhood and for this to be appropriately acknowledged in accordance with a child's point of view. By doing so, Rossetti opened a new conversation surrounding hardships that a mother may experience, which could potentially foster conversation between mother and child on the topic of infant death. I will demonstrate how Rossetti breaks down the stereotype of the idealized mother, while deepening the relationship between mother and child.

Throughout this research, I will use the concept of storytelling through illustration to show how Rossetti was successful in appealing not only to children, but also to the mother, who might be reading with the child. Here, I will refer to visual literacy as a reading convention regarding the accompanying illustrations by Arthur Hughes, and how they are used to show the mother's emotions associated with infant death. My interpretation is that the illustrations create a visual representation of the emotions a mother may be experiencing through Hughes' use of shading, expressions, and metaphors, allowing the child to gain an understanding of the deeper meaning behind the words Rossetti writes on infant death. The illustrations create a place of familiarity for the child who is reading the book of poems and suggest how their own mother may be handling the death of their sibling. The illustrations tell a story in a child-appropriate manner pertaining to the topic of a mother's mental health, in contrast to that of a mother hiding these emotions and leaving their child in the dark regarding what they might be

going through. They acknowledge the struggling mother in contrast to conventions that see this as non-age appropriate during the Victorian era.

Lastly, I will examine the way in which mental health struggles associated with motherhood such as postpartum anxiety and depression were handled through a cultural focus on prayer and religion. My evidence will suggest that prayer was deemed the ultimate cure to any mental health struggle as outlined in several mother's advice manuals. I will demonstrate how seeing prayer as a solution to treating mental health struggles was detrimental to the health of the mother. I will analyze advice manuals ranging from the years 1831 to 1909 to demonstrate how religion and prayer pressured mothers and offered no other solutions. I will then show how Rossetti also used religion to address hardships such as infant loss, but positioned the religious tone with less pressure than the manuals, which suggested that the mother use it as a cure for psychological struggle. In Rossetti's view, religion could serve to promote faith in the future after the experience of a loss, rather than serving as a prescribed cure to mental health issues, as the maternal advice manuals advised. I will contrast the advice manuals with Rossetti's poetry to show how the advice manuals upheld the idealized mother figure through pressuring the mother to use prayer as a cure for mental health issues. In contrast, Rossetti expressed faith as a protecting force that brings peace to the mother. Religion in the advice manuals projects blame and shame on a mother, whereas in *Sing-Song* religion brings faith during difficult times in the form of angels as a protective force for the mother and child.

Cracks in the Cradle: Rossetti's Rebellion Against the Idealized Mother

Throughout my analysis of *Sing-Song* and its depiction of the struggling mother, I observed that Rossetti's portrayal of motherhood significantly contrasted with the Victorian ideals of motherhood. During the Victorian period, the mother was often thought of as the “angel in the house” (Patmore), embodying happiness, selflessness, and devotion to her children and husband. I found it compelling that Rossetti's representation diverged from Patmore's conventional portrayal and depicted a mother who was not afraid to express her true emotions. Rossetti's depiction of a mother expressing emotions beyond happiness led me to explore the deeper messages Rossetti attempted to convey through her poetry, and why she chose to do so in a children's poetry book.

My research began with an examination of primary sources of information related to motherhood during the nineteenth century, which led me to a range of advice manuals published as instructional resources for first-time mothers. During the nineteenth century, advice manuals became a popular source of guidance for women on how to behave according to social convention of the Victorian era (Niiranen). As already noted, women were widely regarded as naturally destined for the roles of wives and mothers. An ideal woman was one who could efficiently manage the household and attend to the needs of her husband and children with ease (Schofield). Advice manuals served as a resource for mothers seeking guidance and instruction on their domestic roles and responsibilities.

Although advertised as acting as a resource for all things that pertain to motherhood and children, I found there to be a gap in the acknowledgment of a mother's mental health and wellbeing. The manuals I examined were published between 1831 and 1903 in England and the United States (see appendix A). The range of dates gave me a

comprehensive overview on the subject of maternal advice throughout the entirety of the Victorian era. The manuals were published by male medical doctors, and others were authored by women who may or may not have had children themselves. I observed a recurring pattern throughout the manuals containing medical advice. It seemed that advice manuals authored by male physicians frequently conveyed a tone of blame, particularly in relation to guidance directed at mothers experiencing psychological difficulties either during birth, or the postpartum period.

The advice manuals position their main topic of advice on the wellbeing of the child, while emphasizing the significance of the mother's stable emotional state in promoting this outcome. While it makes sense that a mother's mental health can directly impact her infant, these advice manuals do not provide guidance on how to cultivate mental well-being. The lack of guidance and recognition surrounding the normalcy of a struggling mother stood out to me. I found it to be disheartening that a book advertised as a comprehensive guide to motherhood failed to address the most crucial aspects, the wellbeing of a mother and her mental health. Such an example reminded me of my own experience with the lack of awareness surrounding postpartum mental health challenges as I entered my own motherhood experience. I found that the advice manuals predominantly focused on the physical aspects of motherhood, often neglecting the mental and emotional dimensions. In contrast, *Sing-Song* provides a more nuanced portrayal of motherhood with its illustrations and poetry vividly depicting the emotional landscape of the mother. The clear representation of emotions places the mother at the center as an emotionally mature figure, capable of teaching her child the full spectrum of emotions that may arise throughout life. It can be argued that the portrayal of an effortless

motherhood experience does not accurately reflect the complex emotional realities that mothers may face, and it overlooks the full range of emotions that are integral to the experience of motherhood.

Rossetti underscores the mother's authentic emotional experiences in these poems and illustrations, drawing attention to the complex nature of a mother's sentiment.

Throughout my research on the mother's role during the Victorian era, particularly when examining advice manuals, I observed that the experience of emotions other than happiness often led to a sense of guilt and blame being imposed upon the mother.

The Mother's Book (1831) by Lydia Maria Child is the earliest of advice manuals that I have chosen to analyze from the nineteenth century. The manual offers advice surrounding the mental wellbeing of one's infant, emphasizing the significant impact a mother's emotional state has on the latter. Child suggests that emotions other than happiness may have detrimental effects on the infant. Child writes "therefore the first rule and the most important of all, in education, is, that a mother govern her own feelings and keep her heart conscious and pure" (Child 2). Child's advice assigns blame to the mother for experiencing negative emotions and proposes prayer as the sole solution for repairing a mother's emotional distress. "Do you say it is impossible always to govern one's feelings? There is one method a never-failing one – prayer" (Child 3). Child's advice manual, with its singular focus on prayer as a solution, fails to address the complexities of emotional adversity inherent in motherhood. The manual underscores the lack of support that was available to mother's navigating emotional hardships.

The Mother at Home (1833) by John S.C. Abbott positions the mother as the "most powerful influence on man" (Abbott 14). It is immediately established that it is a

significant responsibility for the mother to uphold the best influence toward her child.

Abbott goes to great lengths to acknowledge the importance of a mother's authority over a child. Abbott suggests that failure to instill such an authoritative relationship will result in the child's substantial suffering and the mother's potential guilt for neglect (Abbott 29). Like *The Mother's Book*, Abbott positions prayer and God as the central solution to a mother's challenges (Abbott 15). However, in placing the pressure of authority over the child solely on the mother, these manuals neglect to provide sufficient support and advice to the mother on managing her own emotional struggles that may arise in relation to instilling an authoritative relationship.

The Maternal Management of Children (1849) by Thomas Bull focuses on infant death, and the importance of following his manual to avoid the death of one's child (Bull 14). The urgency to follow the advice within the manual draws on a scare tactic to gain the dependence of a mother on Bull's manual. Bull acknowledges that his manual is not something that would be read by a mother who had lost her child but rather insinuates that if followed the chances of one's child's survival is more likely. "It is true this book is not likely to be consulted by mothers who are so unfortunately placed as to justify the alarming expectation of losing their children" (Bull 13). Along with placing blame on the mother if they fail to follow the manual, Bull does not acknowledge the mental well-being of a mother, if struggling with the management of their children. Bull's manual fails to effectively cover the topic of a mother's mental health, therefore implying that mental health challenges are not a common occurrence among mothers. The gap in mental health advice in manuals pertaining to motherhood isolates a mother who is

struggling alone to figure out these challenges, failing to support the mental wellbeing of a mother.

The Nursery Book for Young Mothers (1849) by Louisa C. Tuthill is written in the format of letters exchanged between a new young mother and her experienced aunt. Tuthill's book emphasizes the importance of the role of a mother for a woman and expresses that it is the woman's destiny; and therefore one should accept hardships and move on (Tuthill 19). The advice manual does not necessarily present practical advice on motherhood but rather enforces the notion that a mother was inherently endowed to handle adversity as becoming a mother was a woman's greatest calling in life. Tuthill's manual also insists that a mother's emotions affect the child before they learn to talk. "The emotions are in activity before any communication can be directly held with the infant in words, or even by looks. There are, therefore, little attentions to be paid which no one but a mother can pay" (Tuthill 41). Tuthill reinforces the importance of emotions shared with a child by their mother, thus pressuring the mother to always pay attention to how they are being perceived by their infant. Such an idea reinforces the idealized figure of the mother and importance of not influencing the child with any but positive emotions.

The Mother's Thorough Resource Book (1860) is a medical based manual that was the only one I examined that included mention of a woman's emotional wellbeing during pregnancy. Although acknowledged, this manual insists that a mother's "mental emotions are the last affections of which it is necessary to treat" (*The Mother's Thorough* 12), implying that the emotional wellbeing of a mother, although stated as important, is not a pressing issue. The manual then suggests the importance of the mental wellbeing of the mother regarding the child. "There cannot be a doubt that mental depression in the

mother, of a severe and lasting nature, has a prejudicial influence on the health of the child” (*The Mother’s Thorough* 12). The conflicting advice presented within the manual on the topic of “mental emotions” is evident, as the author initially downplays the urgency of addressing the mother’s depression, yet subsequently assigns blame to the mother if she does not overcome the depression, noting that it will have negative effects on the infant. *The Mother’s Thorough Resource Book* offers advises the mother to “obviate all sources of distress” in order to heal her depression. The manual’s advice on mental wellbeing upholds the lack of practical advice for struggling mothers. The manual fails to represent a nuanced approach to motherhood, and instead presents a vague solution to depression.

Maidenhood and Motherhood (1886) by John D West blames the mother for experiencing emotional hardships and how that can negatively affect the quality of breastmilk. “Intense grief, mental anxiety, paroxysms of passion, or any long-continued or violent emotions of the mind, are, unquestionably, causes of considerable deterioration in the milk” (West 523). In his manual, West uses the lens of blame on a mother with regard to mental health challenges and his work lacks sufficient advice on how to avoid these claims, or how to manage these emotions.

Painless Childbirth: A Book for all Women (1889) by John H. Dye continues the theme of the mental health of the mother affecting their child. Dye suggests that the emotional well-being of the mother is transferred through the mother’s blood to the unborn baby. “Any external circumstances that is capable of making profound or prolonged impression on the mother, may, through the blood or sympathy, affect the child in utero” (Dye 42-3). Dye’s advice leads the mother to believe she will harm her

unborn baby if she is inconsistent with her state of mental health. Again, the advice places blame on the mother, while neglecting to offer counsel on how to achieve a composed mental state.

Advice to a Mother on the Management of Her Children (1898) by Pye Henry Chavasse is another medical oriented manual. Chavasse reinforces the importance of following a manual of this nature in order to guarantee the health of one's child. "Maternal instinct and maternal love . . . can never successfully usurp the place of the skilled physician" (Chavasse vii). Chavasse declares that maternal instincts are an insufficient tool in raising a healthy child, thus undermining the competence of a mother and her maternal instincts.

As revealed throughout these manuals, the pressure placed on mothers to control their mental state, along with the emphasis on the importance of following the guidance provided diminished a mother's confidence in the face of difficulties pertaining to motherhood. These manuals not only impose an expectation for a mother to achieve a mental state of calmness, but they also fail to offer practical advice on how to achieve this state. Here one sees a gap in the advice given to mothers that suggests mental health challenges are not common, only due to the lack of conversation and advice surrounding mental wellbeing of a mother.

While reviewing the secondary literature regarding Christina Rossetti's *Sing-Song* I observed a notable gap in scholarly research concerning the mother figure in the poems and the acknowledgement of her emotional expressions, specifically in relation to the Victorian ideals of motherhood. Several articles analyze Rossetti's *Sing-Song* and the

child audience, but few address the mother and how she is perceived by the reader.⁵ One significant article that contributes to the analysis of the mother represented in *Sing-Song* is Virginia Sickbert's "Christina Rossetti and Victorian Children's Poetry: A Maternal Challenge to the Patriarchal Family" (1993). Sickbert focuses her discussion on the relationship between mother and child, and the perception of the child through the mother's perspective. Sickbert addresses the way in which the mother in *Sing-Song* "does not regard the child as an object" (Sickbert 387). However, while Sickbert focuses on the mother's perception of the child and the relationship of mother and child, she does not analyze how the child perceives the mother and her emotional vulnerability that is equally present throughout *Sing-Song*. The lack of recognition of the emotionally vulnerable mother in *Sing-Song* highlights the need for a more nuanced representation of the expectations of motherhood. Such a portrayal would contrast the more docile mother figure that is idealized during the Victorian era. I began to question why Rossetti chose to represent a mother who expresses emotional vulnerability as opposed to hiding it. My interpretation was the depiction of a mother who is struggling allows Rossetti to represent an inclusive image of a mother to those reading the poems.

The perception of the mother and her emotional vulnerability in *Sing-Song* is demonstrated through not only the poetry, but also through the illustrations by Arthur Hughes. Using visual literacy, the perception of the mother becomes accessible to the child audience. Rossetti uses visual literacy to allow the child exposure to a mother's emotional challenges in relation to experiencing a hardship common in motherhood during the Victorian era, that of infant death.

⁵ Armstrong 2022, Kooistra 1999, Marsh 1995, Sickbert 1993, Wakely-Mulroney 2018

An article that focuses on the accessibility of the audience in the collection is L.J. Kooistra's "The Dialogue of Image and Text in Christina Rossetti's *Sing-Song*" (1999). Kooistra analyzes the connection of poetry and illustration and how it results in a work that becomes "much more than a picture book for children" (Kooistra 466). Kooistra considers how the collaboration between illustration and verse creates an accessible space for mother and child to discuss emotions that may arise in different situations during childhood. I agree that through illustration and verse, Rossetti's work creates such possibilities for both the child and adult audience, although I argue that Kooistra's article does not address how the illustrations in *Sing-Song* are depicting the mother in moments of emotional vulnerability. Kooistra's article also does not examine how *Sing-Song* serves as a significant space for mothers and children to openly discuss emotional complexities surrounding motherhood. My interpretation fosters an understanding of mental health that may not have been acknowledged during the Victorian era in order that the idealized mother figure who did not struggle could be held up as a model.

Along with a gap in the scholarly research available on the topic of the vulnerable emotional state of a mother, the research available on reviews and critiques of Rossetti's work lack the conceptualization of the importance of the illustration and poetry taken as a whole. Often, the poetry and illustrations are analyzed and critiqued separately, ignoring their significance when analyzed in relation to one another. R.A. Bellas, in reviewing the poetry within *Sing-Song* noted how advanced Rossetti was in her poetry regarding the hardships of motherhood, but also expressed how inappropriate this topic was for a child's nursery rhyme book *Christina Rossetti* (1977). "A nursery Rhyme Book, suggests a collection of rhymes for nursery-aged children . . . [the poems of *Sing-Song*] frequently

are directed to older children and even adults” (Bellas 91). Bellas’ lack of acknowledgement of the importance of the connection between the illustration and verse therefore fails to meet the intended objective of *Sing-Song*’s use of visual literacy through the illustrations to communicate to a child the topic of death in an age-appropriate way. Bellas’ failure to consider the interplay between poetry and illustration limits the scope of his critique. “The poems on the theme of death – and there are many – tend to be moralistic and are undistinguished” (Bellas 97). Bellas misses an essential aspect of Rossetti’s purpose in *Sing-Song*, which is to discuss adult topics in a manner that is accessible to both mother and child. Bellas’s biography of Rossetti highlights the lack of research available to consider *Sing-Song* as a children’s book that is meant to be analyzed with consideration to both illustration and verse.

Along with Bellas, although much earlier in the nineteenth century, Sidney Colvin writes in his review of *Sing-Song* (1902) in *The Academy*, that with the dual perspective, some of the poems suggest messages that extend far beyond the emotional comprehension of a child (Colvin 23). Like Bellas, Colvin does not address the importance of the poetry and illustrations working together to become accessible to both adult and child audience, highlighting a lack of understanding of Rossetti’s purpose behind the illustrations and the poetry as a whole. I believe that the lack of recognition of the illustration and text working together to present the poems messages disregards Rossetti’s thoughtfulness in her interpretation of the mother.

Rossetti’s representation of a struggling mother in her children’s poetry book shows how it wildly conflicted with the accepted image of a mother during the Victorian era. Janet Horowitz Murray (1982) explores the societal pressures a mother was expected

to conform to in order to maintain the image of the idealized mother figure. Murray acknowledges the idea of the “domestic angel” as something that existed in order for a woman to appear to have motherhood and the care of the home and her husband under control. Murray states that because of the lack of rights for women, it was important that women achieve this persona so as to not risk upsetting their husband as they would lose their home and family if they failed to maintain these aspects of their lives (Murray 77). Although this article presents a gap in the acknowledgement of a mother’s mental health, I will use the example of pressure put on women that Murray mentions in order to identify the importance of appearing to have one’s home, children, and duties as a wife under control, in turn, reinforcing the effects of the idealized mother figure that was ultimately detrimental to a woman’s mental health.

Throughout my research on the topic of motherhood as depicted in Rossetti’s *Sing-Song*, I found there to be a lack of scholarly resources regarding why Rossetti chose to represent a struggling mother. In *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography* (1995) Jan Marsh claims Rossetti’s poetry is “mothering” (Marsh 379). She acknowledges that *Sing-Song* is “mothering the child within” (Marsh 379), and that it is autobiographical (379). Marsh argues that Rossetti is writing as if she were a mother reacting to her own emotions and experiences as a child. Marsh argues that “She was writing to and for herself in a conscious return to her own infancy” (Marsh 379). Although I agree with Marsh that *Sing-Song* is “mothering”, Rossetti is not writing to herself and the child within, rather she is highlighting a struggling mother that she chooses to acknowledge in *Sing-Song*, offering a representation of normalcy pertaining to struggle. In turn, this becomes reassuring for a mother experiencing psychological trauma through

experiencing infant death. Rossetti is mothering the struggling mother in hardship.

Rossetti's focus on the mother in *Sing-Song* stood out to me and raised the question as to how she was able to achieve an accurate representation of a postpartum grieving mother when she did not have children of her own.

I suggest that Rossetti's *Sing-Song* represents the role of a struggling mother through her time volunteering with "fallen women" at St. Mary Magdalene Penitentiary at Highgate. In an article in the *British Newspaper: Morning Post of London* on April 13, 1860, the penitentiary is advertised as looking for "fallen women" wanting to better their lives and be reintroduced into society. The advertisement explains how the women will receive training in domesticity and how to morally improve as members of Victorian society (*London Diocesan Penitentiary*). Rossetti volunteered at Highgate from 1859 to 1870. Her time here would have influenced her writing as *Sing-Song* was published a few years later. Kathryn Burlinson, author of *Christina Rossetti* (1998), focuses on Rossetti's experience at Highgate, and how the women did not follow the traditional path of motherhood. William Acton, a British writer and doctor who focused most of his career on the life of prostitution and female sex workers published *Prostitution Considered in its Social, Moral, and Sanitary Aspects* in 1857. Acton's goal was to instill moral behaviour in order to influence a better life for these "fallen women". Acton writes, "It comes to this, then, if the good dormant in them is to be awakened and made productive, fallen women must be brought into contact with those who have the means and the will to help them" (Acton 241). It is evident that Acton's idea that fallen women must be influenced by women who could act as a role model for them was exactly the role that Rossetti partook in at Highgate. Burlinson mentions that "Rossetti strove to re-educate fallen

women through religious and moral instruction and retrain them as domestic servants” (Burlinson 47). Although one could interpret this as being a mothering role that Rossetti took on, it is clear that Rossetti felt it important to reintroduce such women into the world. Rossetti helped inmates of Highgate achieve the persona of the idealized mother figure in such a way that the women could re-enter the world of domesticity, or to serve, in Burlinson’s words as “domestic servants” (47). Here, the question exists as to why in *Sing-Song*, Rossetti would represent a mother who was not perceived as the idealized mother figure, while she was actively instilling those beliefs in women during her time volunteering at St. Mary Magdalen. There continues to be a gap in the scholarly study of the influence of Rossetti’s volunteering on herself and her poetry, specifically in *Sing-Song*.

It is evident that religion plays a role in the poetry in *Sing-Song*. In the 2018 publication *The Aesthetics of Children’s Poetry: A Study of Children’s Verse in English* Katherine Wakely-Mulroney and Louise Joy acknowledge the unique way in which Rossetti incorporates religion into the work. “*Sing-Song* is not a collection of religious verse, but its poems are premised on a reserved yet unwavering faith in God” (Wakely-Mulroney, et al. 141). Mulroney and Joy argue that religion in children’s poetry was frequently used as a form of teaching about Christianity in a way that influenced obedience to authority (Wakely-Mulroney, et al. 141). They argue that Rossetti interprets faith “from a child’s perspective as natural and simple” (Wakely-Mulroney, et al. 141), implying that this was not the traditional role of religion in children’s nursery rhyme books during the Victorian era. Throughout my research into the spirituality that exists in *Sing-Song* I found there to be a lack of scholarly resources that acknowledged Rossetti’s

unique approach as interpreted in *The Aesthetics of Children's Poetry* by Wakely-Mulroney. The question arises as to the purpose of Rossetti's approach to creating a space where religion and faith were presented and perceived as natural and simple. In the article titled "Sound, Sense, and Structures in Christina Rossetti's *Sing-Song*," Sharon Smulder states that the illustrator Arthur Hughes "draws on the suggestive intersection of temporal and eternal realms in *Sing-Song* as a whole" (Smulders 12). Here, Smulders refers to how Hughes' illustrations often include figures of angels in order to suggest the physical and eternal world. Smulder however, fails to connect the poetry to the illustration in order to represent the full concept of how Rossetti's message converses with the illustration. I argue that the combination of media was a way for Rossetti to make difficult topics such as infant death more accessible for children to understand. She does this by using religion, specifically the image of angels, to interpret the physical and spiritual world as a place that is not to be feared, but rather where the angels act as a mothering force for the infant who has died. Variations of the idea exists in a number of Rossetti's poems, including "Baby Lies so Fast Asleep".

Throughout *Sing-Song* it is evident that the poems on infant death are appropriate both for the mother and child audience. In *The Children of England: A Contribution to Social History and to Education* (1923) Joseph Findlay acknowledges that a child is not the same as an adult, and that a children required age-appropriate acknowledgement when faced with adult situations. Findlay's approach to what were the ideals of Victorian childhood reinforce Rossetti's use of duality or different narrative models in *Sing-Song* in its appeal to both child and adult audience.

In my research pertaining to the role of a mother in the Victorian era it is evident that there are weaknesses in the scholarly research on the significance of Christina Rossetti's interpretation of the mother in the poems of *Sing-Song*. Through my research I realized just how nuanced her representation of a struggling mother was in the context of the Victorian era. The importance of the contrast between this work by Rossetti and the limited critical response to her approach to motherhood brings awareness to the mental health challenges often faced in motherhood that are not always discussed openly, even today. Rossetti effectively conveyed the struggles of motherhood through both illustration and poetry, presenting the challenges faced by mothers in a manner that validated their experiences. By addressing hardship explicitly and making it a central theme, Rossetti created a space where the difficulties of motherhood were normalized. While *Sing-Song* was marketed as a children's nursery rhyme book, it was subtly coded for the maternal reader. Beyond serving as a source of comfort for mothers in distress, *Sing-Song* also played a pivotal role for its readers in acknowledging that hardships inherent in motherhood were both common and legitimate.

Why Are We Struggling Alone? Sing-Song-ing Through the Pain

Throughout the Victorian era, the role of a mother, something that could be seen as a private domestic position within the home, was being discussed publicly in society. The public display of family life and motherhood represented by Queen Victoria marked the beginning of such ideals. She embodied the woman, wife, and mother that soon many were striving to replicate. While the ideal of motherhood was demonstrated in the public sphere by Queen Victoria, the reality of motherhood was very different. In *Daily Life of Victorian Women* (2013), Lydia Murdoch explores the significance of what she terms the “Victorian ideal of domesticity” (Murdoch 73) and how Queen Victoria played a key role in shaping a woman’s public identity as a wife and mother (Murdoch 73). Similarly, in the 1923 *New York Times* newspaper article, “Victorian Women, Including Victoria” Pauline Maier discussed how Queen Victoria had a profound influence on women during the time of her reign. Maier highlights how Victoria was a strong-minded woman who acted as an example for childbirth, becoming the first to use chloroform as a form of pain relief (Maier 23). Queen Victoria’s showcasing of the access to pain relief during such a pivotal time for a woman’s body in childbirth became a model example for women and their rights during the nineteenth century. Queen Victoria created a sense of advocacy for women, expressing rights that were not often normalized for women (Maier 23). The example of a powerful woman was thus available to many during the Victorian era, creating an ideal mother figure that women would aspire to mirror in their journey through motherhood.

Although a powerful example for women’s rights, the difficulty with Queen Victoria’s example was that her life was unattainable for most women. Therefore, Queen

Victoria's image that she portrayed as a mother was unrealistic, setting women up for failure as they strove to achieve this image of a mother. Maier writes "The Victorian family was of course idealized. It was supposed to be a haven from the harsher outside world" (Maier 23). The portrayal of the Victorian family as a sanctuary of love and solitude presented a distorted image, masking the many challenges and hardships faced by most middle-and lower-class families. It represented a constructed narrative that distracted from the complex realities of family life and motherhood in the Victorian period.

Women's identity during the Victorian era limited women to the sphere of the home, as the home symbolized the woman's identity. In *Strong-Minded Women, and Other Lost Voices from Nineteenth Century England* (1982) author Janet Horowitz Murray explores the demands and societal pressures to which a mother was expected to conform to create the idealized family home. Murray expressed the importance of the home to a woman's identity, and how the two intertwine. She writes, "Women's proper sphere was the home – the shrine and shelter of the domestic angel" (Murray 77). Murray suggests that a woman was a prisoner in her own home, given the lack of rights that existed for her as a woman, wife, and mother. There was pressure to maintain the home, take care of the family, and keep a husband happy. In failing to achieve this, women risked the loss of everything as society "made it difficult for a woman to survive outside the family structure" (Murray 77) and in turn, creating pressure on women to appear successful in the domestic role. The concept of the domestic angel represented an idealized version of motherhood that was difficult to achieve due to economic realities of lower-class woman. Maintaining the role of an idealized woman or "domestic angel" as

Murray states could be detrimental to a woman or mother's mental health if they were faced with hardships that distracted them from their daily duties in the home.

During the Victorian era, women were expected to take care of the home, children, and husband without complaint, even when faced with hardships. In the anthology *Maternity: Letters from Working Women* (1915), edited by Margaret Llewelyn Davies, an anonymous letter writer recounts the experience of a mother and wife struggling with poverty, a sick husband, and debilitating eczema, highlighting the hardships many women faced in motherhood. Although the book of letters was published some years after the end of the Victorian era, it speaks to the experience of a mother during that time and leading up to the twentieth century. The letter exposes how the expectations of the roles of wife and mother were not revealed before a woman entered the domestic stage of life. "My mother, a dear, pious soul, thought ignorance was innocence, and the only thing I remember her saying on the subject of childbirth was, 'God never send a babe without bread to feed it'" (Davies 44). It is clear through this letter that the experience within the domestic sphere of wife and mother during the nineteenth century was not always explained to the woman entering it. It was expected that all would work itself out, ignoring possible hardships, a concept explored in Virginia Woolf's *Room of One's Own* (1929) Although exceeding the timeframe of the Victorian era, Woolf explores social injustices that existed for women, similar to the letter in the above publication of *Maternity: Letters from Working Women* (1915) with its reference to the idea of ignorance being innocence. Woolf believed that women needed their own space and money in order to move beyond willed ignorance. The reality that a woman entering motherhood had no true indication of what was to be expected resulted in a

profound sense of shock when their experience did not resemble that of the idealized mother. I suggest that ignorance played a role in possible mental health challenges a mother might experience in the Victorian era. The pains of childbirth, postpartum healing, and how a mother's role as wife would change with the newly reliant baby by her side underscores how the idea of the "domestic angel" is detrimental to a woman's mental health (Murray). The destiny of the woman during the Victorian era was to take care of the home and to give birth. All of this was a seemingly natural or easy future when one had the idea of the "domestic angel" to look to as an example. It was a pivotal concept in the world of the mother as it created an idealized mother figure to try to achieve that which was often unachievable. As a result, in the Victorian era, the role of a mother was idealized.

Another aspect of the idealized mother figure or the "domestic angel" that would have been challenged through lived experience as compared to what was expected in motherhood was the experience of infant death. Infant death is important to my argument as it exposes the reality of motherhood and the woman's inability to cope with the stresses of their idealized world. During the Victorian era, infant death was common among families (Maier 25). Despite this life changing event, women were still expected to uphold their daily duties as wife and mother. Janet Horowitz Murray writes that women who showed a side of themselves that did not reflect "the doting mother" image were not often discussed (Murray 6).

During the Victorian era, idealized maternity was a misleading image for a woman to strive to achieve. Along with the expectations of motherhood in the nineteenth century, childhood was also a world in which certain ideals for behaviour were expected.

As E. Hopkins explains in his book *Childhood Transformed: Working-Class Children in Nineteenth Century England* (1994), before the nineteenth century childhood was not a concept that was understood. A child was expected to exist in society as an adult would (Hopkins 2). In *The Children of England: A Contribution to Social History and to Education* (1923) Joseph John Findlay examines how slowly the acceptance of the idea that a child is different from an adult came about. Findlay explains that before the nineteenth century, parents were encouraged to convey a firm disposition towards children and to treat them as small adults. He states that eventually the concept of childhood was understood and “our kindlier feelings towards the young, [allow us to] recognize that childhood is the time for play and that even if we must deny ourselves by overwork, the child must be free to enjoy himself” (Findlay 146). As Findlay explains, the newfound understanding of childhood created a perspective that the child must be shielded from all that is not innocently joyous in the adult world. I suggest this could be regarded as an act of sheltering the child from learning how to deal with hardships in life, therefore creating an inadequate expectation of the nature of the adult world.

As the social construct of childhood became a more nuanced concept, it was clear that it was the parental responsibility to protect their child from the hardships of the world. During the Victorian era, the care of the children mostly fell on the mother, therefore making it her job to be sure that the child led a childhood that did not include concern for the adult world (Findlay 146). Such an idea could also be seen as enforcing naivety, just as the image of the mother was socially created and had a similar effect. Both motherhood and childhood as states held certain societal expectations. It is evident that along with conforming to the idealized mother figure, a mother would also be

expected to maintain an innocent life or one without worry for her children. The weight of protecting her family's image, along with the innocence of her children falls heavily on a mother's conscience, especially when faced with socio-economic factors such as poverty, illness, or death.

Rossetti is able to expose the idealization of motherhood and childhood in her culture in *Sing Song*. Rossetti is teaching lessons through her poetry, but these are not lessons of agreement with one's mother and father. Instead, she is teaching the mother/child relationship to be open, creating a relationship where the child feels comfortable discussing hardships with their parents, as opposed to an authoritarian relationship. This in turn helps the child learn how to deal with hardships through the guidance of their parents. Rossetti invites the child into the adult conversation through poetry that appeals to both the adult and child audience (Findlay 146), a concept that goes against the Victorian ideal of not including children in adult concerns. Throughout *Sing-Song* the ups and downs of motherhood and childhood are exposed. Rossetti does not depict the idealized mother figure as several of her poems represent infant death and the mother's emotions such as emotional pain and heartache that coincide with such a detrimental event.

Rossetti is able to conceptualize a conversation that may happen between mother and child on hardships and successfully demonstrates this conversation through poetry and illustration in *Sing-Song*. Such an example can be seen in the poem "Why Did Baby Die". Rossetti depicts the emotions of both mother and child in a way that answers questions for the child of why the mother may be experiencing emotional turmoil. The poem does not idealize a mother as it exposes raw emotions a mother would face during

the loss of her infant. It shows the child as a humanized version of their mother in terms of it being a normal human experience to feel emotional pain. “Why Did Baby Die” breaks down the stereotype during the Victorian era that a mother must always appear as a domestic angel as explained by Murray (73).

Jan Marsh in *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Bibliography* (1995) shows how *Sing-Song* becomes a place to find comfort regarding difficulties one may face in either childhood or motherhood, a place for guidance like a mother would offer. The poetry comforts a mother, just as a mother would attend to a child who scraped their knee. These poems confront hardships in motherhood with the mother’s own child learning beside her, standing true to the idea that *Sing-Song* was not just for the child, but also for the mother. These poems give the reader and listener an opportunity to connect through emotional situations in a way that might not have been seen as appropriate in children’s poetry.

Sing-Song demonstrates many aspects of the mother-child relationship. Although Christina Rossetti did not have children herself, she was able to capture the relationship accurately as we see in her poems that acknowledge a mother and child. Rossetti’s time working with “fallen women” at St. Mary Magdalene in Highgate put her in a space where she was exposed to several different female influences and experiences surrounding motherhood. In her article “The Role of the ‘Fallen Woman’” White states that a fallen woman was “essentially, any deviance from the paragon of ideal Victorian womanhood, the ‘angel in the house’ insinuated that a woman's fall was imminent” (White). White explains that a mother’s acceptance in society ultimately depended on her marital status which relegated her to the idealized domestic angel of the Victorian era.

Rossetti's time at St. Mary Magdalene exposed her to the women who were shunned from society due to their unconventional lives as mothers (Burlinson 46). I propose that during her time volunteering at St. Mary Magdalene in Highgate, Rossetti developed a nuanced point of view on women who were labeled as "fallen", accepting that these women would be worthy of respect, regardless of their marital or societal status. During her time volunteering, Rossetti would have been exposed to many hardships experienced in motherhood, therefore resulting in having a point of view on motherhood that was different from that of the idealized mother figure common during the Victorian era. My contention is that his breakdown of the role of a mother can be seen throughout Rossetti's book *Sing-Song*.

The examples of motherhood that Rossetti chooses to include in her children's rhyming book, *Sing-Song*, make it clear that the emotions and experience of infant loss are openly discussed through illustration and poetry. According to Kathryn Burlinson in *Christina Rossetti* (1998) the women at Lady Magdalene "were not allowed to speak of their past experiences" (Burlinson 46). Hardships were not to be openly discussed, but rather hidden. Such repression created a false expectation of a woman's real experience in becoming a mother. I suggest that during her time as a volunteer at Highgate, Rossetti recognized that the lack of conversation on aspects of one's experience with motherhood had negative effects on the mother. Such sentiment is articulated in *Sing-Song* through the acknowledgement of a mother's emotions surrounding hardships. For example, in "Motherless Baby and Babyless Mother" the mother in the illustration is surrendering to her heartache of the loss of her own infant, as seen through the way the mother is lying next to her infant's grave. Here, the story of suffering is openly portrayed by a mother.

Along with her experience at Highgate influencing her poetry in *Sing-Song*, Rossetti's close relationship with her own mother that continued through adulthood is also portrayed in her poetry. In her biography of Rossetti, Marsh explains the relationship between Rossetti and her mother. "As the youngest she was cradled on the breast while the older children played" (Marsh 1). Through a very close relationship with her mother, Rossetti would experience motherly love that would fuel her words throughout *Sing-Song*.

It is clear that the poems show not only a connection to what a mother might be going through, but also the child's reaction and questions that they have about it for the mother. An example can be seen in "Why Did Baby Die?"

Why did baby die,
 Making Father sigh,
 Mother cry?
 Flowers, that bloom to die,
 Make no reply
 Of "why?"
 But bow and die. (Rossetti 1-7)

The children have removed themselves from the sight of their parents and are questioning what they have witnessed their parents going through. They understand that something sad has happened, even though they do not know why it has occurred, including why their baby sibling has died. Along with questioning their parents' reaction and asking a lot of why questions, "Why Did Baby Die" shows the private sphere of the child's mind regarding what they can comprehend when their parent shows certain emotions. It can be

argued that the hidden moment between siblings that is interpreted through text and illustration, creates a learning space where a parent can understand the perspective of a child experiencing hardship, while the child learns the parents' perspective. I suggest that the perspective for both adult and child creates a space for an open conversation surrounding hardships, a conversation that might not be accepted by traditional Victorian standards of the adult world versus the child's world in terms of what is appropriate.

The concept of the openness to discuss hardships between parent and child creates equality between parent and child. In Sickbert's article "Christina Rossetti and Victorian Children's Poetry: A Maternal Challenge to the Patriarchal Family" (1993), she mentions the traditional patriarchal family dynamic during the Victorian era, and how Rossetti's poetry runs counter to that dynamic.

Through this analysis of Rossetti's construction of parenthood and childhood in her children's poetry the reader can see most clearly her differences with the main currents of children's literature and with the best-known Victorian ideology about the patriarchal, authoritarian family. (Sickbert 386)

Rossetti was going against the norm of the authoritarian family during the Victorian era, where children were not able to be protected from all knowledge of hardship but were still expected to obey. Rossetti's openness to the notion of sharing hardships such as the emotions surrounding infant death fosters a relationship in which hard topics can be discussed between mother and child, therefore negating the need to portray an idealized mother figure through her poetry.

The way that Rossetti avoids the idea of the obedient child or the authoritarian parent shows how much she favours the loving, gentle, and understanding relationship

between child and mother, rather than reinforcing the idealized mother figure. An example can be seen in the poem in *Sing-Song* titled “Love Me – I Love You”;

Love me, - I love you,
 Love me, my baby;
 Sing it high, sing it low,
 Sing it as may be.

Mother’s arms under you,
 Her eyes above you;
 Sing it high, sing it low,
 Love me – I love you. (Rossetti 1-8)

Rossetti expresses the love and protection a mother feels for her child, implying that mother and child have a strong bond that is not easily broken. The lines that state “Mother’s arms under you, / Her eyes above you;” (Rossetti 5-6) demonstrate the understanding that a mother’s love and protection will always be present for the child. The way Rossetti uses opposing adverbs such as “under” and “above”, and “high” and “low” emphasizes the totality of love and support a mother has for a child. The poem demonstrates how Rossetti interprets a mother-child relationship that is not necessarily matriarchal, but rather protective and filled with unconditional love. Rossetti makes it clear that children do not always need demand for obedience, but they need love and guidance in order to thrive.

Rossetti writes “Sing it high, sing it low, / Sing it as may be” (Rossetti 3-4). These lines allude to the idea that motherhood is full of ups and downs. She then goes on to

finish the line with “Sing it as may be” (Rossetti 4). Rossetti interprets highs and lows as something that is a natural part of motherhood; therefore a mother must accept the ups and downs and not dwell on them. The idea points to a mother showing understanding towards a child and their emotional wellbeing rather than being consumed by the patriarchal expectations of the mother-child dynamic of the Victorian era. Even when faced with hard times a child should be met with love and understanding. Rossetti expresses this idea through the phrase “sing it as may be” (Rossetti 4). She alludes to the power of unconditional love and to the notion of taking things as they come instead of trying to control each moment of the mother and child relationship.

Another example of unconditional love that Rossetti portrays in her poetry comes from the poem entitled “Crying, My Little One, Footsore and Weary?”.

Crying, my little one, footsore and weary?

Fall asleep, pretty one, warm on my shoulder:

I must tramp on through the winter night dreary,

While the snow falls on me colder and colder.

You are my one, and I have not another;

Sleep soft, my darling, my trouble and treasure;

Sleep warm and soft in the arms of your mother,

Dreaming of pretty things, dreaming of pleasure. (Rossetti 1-8)

“Crying, My Little One, Footsore and Weary?” is accompanied by Arthur Hughes’s illustration (see figure 3) that shows a mother carrying a child through a

snowstorm. The mother is holding on tight to the child while bowing her head into the child to protect them from the storm. The image suggests how the mother is physically protecting the child from all the harsh elements of the outdoors. The mother shielding the child from the snow metaphorically allude to the protection a mother gives a child through all the storms of life. Such a concept can be compared to the unconditional protection and care a mother has for their child through all the ups and downs of life. The mother is protecting the child with love and a nurturing kindness rather than allowing the hardships to affect the child.



Figure 3, “Crying, My Little One, Footsore and Weary?” from Christina Rossetti’s *Sing-Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book*. London, Routledge and Sons, 1872, p 19.

The mother in the poem is recognizing that the child is there with her going through the hardship as she is experiencing it, demonstrating that they will get through the hardship together. The poem shows the child that even through hard times, the mother will protect them, while also opening up the conversation to hardships that the mother might be facing. “Fall asleep, pretty one, warm on my shoulder: / I must tramp on

through the winter night dreary, / While the snow falls on me colder and colder” (Rossetti 3-5). Here it is evident that the mother is protecting the child, while still acknowledging that the child is both experiencing and aware of the hardship. “Sleep warm and soft in the arms of your mother, / Dreaming of pretty things, dreaming of pleasure” (Rossetti 8-9). Although it is clear the child is right there with the mother through hard times, she still can protect and recognize the needs of the child. Rossetti is able to create a place where through illustration and poetry, the journey through a hardship is expressed to show that with a mother’s love, things will work out, therefore offering comfort to both mother and child.

Rossetti is teaching lessons through her poetry, but these are not lessons of obeying one’s mother and father. Instead, she is teaching that the mother/child relationship should be open, to create an understanding of what each one might be going through when faced with the topics discussed in her rhymes. This therefore, shows how Rossetti was attempting to change the conversation on parenting and motherhood. I contend that *Sing-Song* demonstrated that the relationship between mother and child needed to be nurtured and open instead of closed off and hierarchical. Such an idea can be seen in many of Rossetti’s poems including the poem titled “A Baby’s Cradle With No Baby In It”

A baby’s cradle with no baby in it,

A baby’s grave where autumn leaves drop sere;

The sweet soul gathered home to Paradise,

The body waiting here. (Rossetti 1-4)

“A Baby’s Cradle With No Baby In It” is accompanied by the illustration (see figure 4) of a mother draping herself over an empty baby’s cradle.



Figure 4. “A Baby’s Cradle With No Baby In It” from Christina Rossetti’s *Sing-Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book*. London, Routledge and Sons, 1872, p 15.

The dark shading of her dress emphasizes the mourning the mother is going through. The poem clearly states what has happened, that a baby has died, and all that is left is the cradle. The picture further illustrates how the death is affecting the mother. The illustration is something that contains details of the lifeless child but would be easily detectable to a child as to what is happening and the emotions at play. The image explains how a baby has died, possibly the child’s own baby brother or sister, and shows how the mother might be feeling. The illustration could act as a helpful tool to a young child to understand what is going on in their life if they themselves have had an infant death in their own family. The poem is simple in its words, and loud in its illustrations. It could be very confusing to some children as to why the mother is mourning and expressing emotions of sadness or depression. “A Baby’s Cradle With No Baby In It” is successful

in attempting to raise the topic of infant death, while also suggesting what the child might witness or experience of the mother and her own emotions. There is no superiority suggested over the child in these poems, but rather the poetry functions as a place for the child and mother to engage as equals, nurturing a relationship where any open communication is encouraged.

Struggling? Hide it! The Lack of Acknowledgement of Maternal Mental Health in Advice Manuals from the Nineteenth Century

Throughout the Victorian era, not only was the private sphere of domesticity becoming publicly presented due to Queen Victoria's influences on motherhood (Maier 23), but it also became public through the production of advice manuals written for mothers throughout the nineteenth century. Motherhood advice manuals typically covered several topics such as breastfeeding, teething, and medical advice for treating illness. Although guidance was offered on all matters pertaining to the child, I argue that these manuals overlooked the challenges a mother might face throughout the course of motherhood. The insufficient resources that might represent a struggling mother in maternal advice manuals reinforced the notion that a mother was put on a pedestal and expected to gracefully handle all that would be thrown at her throughout motherhood. In the absence of resources addressing maternal challenges, mothers were not sufficiently prepared to manage hardships such as infant death and the associated mental health implications. The mother's advice manuals available throughout the Victorian era reinforced the idealized mother figure in not acknowledging that a mother might experience struggles, or express adverse emotions.

Although not advertised as a mother's advice manual, Christina Rossetti's *Sing-Song* offers such acknowledgement regarding mental health challenges in motherhood. The poems that depict a mother experiencing an adverse array of emotions through both poetry and the illustrations by Arthur Hughes in Rossetti's *Sing-Song* include "My Baby Has a Father and a Mother", "A Baby's Cradle With No Baby in it", "Crying My Little

One”, “Why Did Baby Die”, and “Motherless Baby and Babyless Mother”. These poems represent the mother.

The first poem “My Baby Has a Father and a Mother” refers to a baby whose both mother and father appear to be rich. The illustration depicts a mother lying on a bed asleep, while her baby pulls at her dress looking to feed (see figure 5).



Figure 5. “My Baby has a father and a mother” from Christina Rossetti’s *Sing-Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book*. London, Routledge and Sons, 1872, p 3.

To me, the illustration symbolizes both the physical and emotional burdens that caring for a baby imposes on a mother. The mother's attempt to rest, contrasted with the baby reaching out to nurse, underscores the mental weight of caregiving and the impossibility of complete rest when the mother serves as the primary source of sustenance for the child. Throughout *Sing-Song* I observed an absence of a father figure in the illustrations. Although the father is mentioned in the poetry, his visual representation is missing. I believe that by intentionally leaving out the father figure in the illustration as a means of highlighting the unequal responsibility of the mother Rossetti is acknowledging the mother. The illustration emphasizes the complex physical and mental load that motherhood entails, even during periods of attempted rest, therefore contrasting with the idea that a mother that can perform all duties with ease.

The illustrations by Arthur Hughes were developed from sketches originally done by Rossetti herself in the early stages of producing the manuscript of *Sing-Song* (Battiscombe 552), therefore emphasizing the intentional meaning behind each illustration in relation to the poetry. Through the thoughtful qualities of each illustration and accompanying poem Rossetti is relaying a message to the mother reading these rhymes to her child. Ultimately, it is an example of how *Sing-Song* is in my terms coded for the mother.

Rossetti's work established an accessible place for a mother to find comfort, particularly through experiences that encompass the mental health challenges often associated with infant loss. Although advertised as a children's book, *Sing-Song* becomes a place where a mother is able to articulate struggles a woman may face in motherhood. Ultimately, *Sing-Song* deconstructs the idealized mother figure, offering a more nuanced representation of motherhood.

Challenges experienced in motherhood did not align with the idealized mother figure that was portrayed in societal narratives during the Victorian era. Specifically, in failing to acknowledge the emotional struggles involved in motherhood, the motherhood advice manuals published in the nineteenth century⁶ present a biased or one-sided representation of the maternal experience. The lack of representation resulted in less conversation surrounding the topic of the struggling mother. "There cannot be a doubt that mental depression in the mother, of a severe and lasting nature, has a prejudicial influence on the health of the child" (*The Mother's Thorough Resource Book* 12). It is evident that the advice manual implies that if a mother is unable to overcome mental

⁶ See Appendix A for full list of advice manuals researched for the purpose of this thesis

depression, they may jeopardize the health of their child. Blame is positioned in a way to pressure a mother to preserve a mental state that would reflect complete composure in front of their child. *The Mother's Thorough Resource Book* reinforced the idealized mother by upholding an unrealistic expectation for a mother's mental state. Given the lack of guidance on how a mother should navigate her own mental health challenges, *The Mother's Thorough Resource Book* fails to offer a nuanced approach to addressing "mental emotions". Rather, it places blame on the mother for failure to maintain a composed and stable persona, resulting in the feelings of shortcoming as a mother.

Maternal advice manuals reinforced not only that a mother's disposition must be controlled, but also the notion that maternal instincts alone were insufficient. The manuals positioned themselves as essential resources, persuading mothers to rely on them for guidance. Evidence of this can be found in *The Maternal Management of Children in Health and Disease* (1849) by physician Thomas Bull. Bull's manual pressured mothers into believing their innate maternal instincts were unfavourable. Consequently, mothers were led to rely on these manuals under the assumption that doing so was in the best interest of their child. I argue that the pressure to follow advice manuals created stress among new mothers fighting their maternal instincts. Within the first few pages of *The Maternal Management of Children in Health and Disease* (1849), Bull mentions the rates of infant death among the population of England, acknowledging that approximately one in five children die within the first year of their life (Bull 13). Bull does not claim to have a cure for infant death, but rather suggests that if followed correctly, a mother can decrease the chances of losing her child through the advice of his manual (Bull 14). By instilling a sense of urgency in following his advice, linked to the potential mortality of

their child, Bull underscores the importance of his manual for new mothers. Such advice creates stress for a new mother who may feel the need to follow the manual closely in order to raise a healthy child. I contend that such an approach undermines a mother's ability to rely on her maternal instincts. As a result, this contributes to heightened anxiety, therefore reinforcing a generalized approach to motherhood as an identity, resulting in the pressure to uphold the disposition of the idealized mother figure.

The theme I have identified of disregarding a mother's maternal instincts was common in the advice manuals of the nineteenth century. For example, in *Chavasse's Advice to a Mother on the Management of Her Children* (1898) Chavasse writes, "Maternal instinct and maternal love, even when fortified by a volume of this nature, can never successfully usurp the place of a skilled physician" (Chavasse 12). Chavasse continues into the closing words of the preface where he states that the advice within his manual should become second nature for a mother (Chavasse 16). Chavasse constructs a narrative in which his advice manual becomes a more reliable source of guidance than a mother's intuition and observation. It undermines a mother's capabilities and promotes a standardized approach to motherhood. It presupposes that the advice in the manual is universally applicable. Such pressure reinforces the stereotype of the idealized mother figure in the Victorian era as it strips a mother of confidence in her own instincts and suggests conforming to the glorified mother who would follow the advice in the manual rather than their own maternal instincts. With Chavasse's expectation that his advice should become second nature to a mother and universally apply to all mothers, the role of the mother is being generalized to uphold the idealized mother figure.

In comparison to Chavasse and Bull's manuals that were prominent among medical advice publications, *The Mother's Book* by Lydia Maria Child, and *The Nursery Book for Young Mothers* by L.C Tuthill differ in format. Although structured differently than the medical advice manuals, the idealization of a mother as having complete emotional control, and ascribing blame if unachievable is also present within these two manuals. *The Mother's Book* reads like a novel, going through each stage of motherhood organized into different chapters. In this regard, the book takes less of a medical approach, but rather teaches about a child's emotions. Lydia Child expresses how a mother is to support a child's emotional development through diminishing her own emotional responses. "The first and most important thing . . . is that the mother should keep her own spirit in tranquility and purity; for it is beyond all doubt that the state of a mother affects her child" (Child 2). Here it is evident that the responsibility for the child's well-being is ascribed to the mother's ability to maintain emotional composure. Throughout *The Mother's Book*, Child suggests that prayer can heal a mother's mental health challenges in order to uphold the idealized mother figure. "Do you say it is impossible always to govern one's feelings? There is one method a never-failing one – prayer. It consoles and strengthens the wounded heart and tranquilizes the most stormy passions" (Child 3). Child presents prayer as the solution for a mother struggling to control her emotions. Prayer is positioned as the solution for a mother who may be struggling mentally, therefore, leaving a mother with one solution; if this does not work then they have failed.

Child expresses a direct correlation between the mother's mental health and the health of their child, creating an expectation that a mother must always express a calm

demeanor in order to be a positive influence on their child. Such a practice undermines a more accurate representation of a mother's emotional experiences through motherhood, subsequently creating an unrealistic expectation for a mother to uphold. I argue that this advice leads to an unachievable emotional state for a mother, which in turn crystalizes the notion that a mother must always have her emotions regulated. The unrealistic expectation expressed in *The Mother's Book* reinforces the conventions of the idealized mother figure that existed during the Victorian period.

The advice manual *The Nursery Book for Young Mothers* (1849) written by Louisa C. Tuthill narrates the story of a first-time young mother who is struggling in her new role. She expresses that she feels unfit to mother her infant. Her reassuring aunt writes to her to instill confidence. The advice emphasizes the importance of the instinctual role of a mother unlike the other manuals examined so far. However, the advice, like that in *The Mothers Book* by Lydia Maria Child does not come with practical suggestions, but rather pertains to the power of prayer. The young mother Gertrude writes, "Pity the sorrows of a poor young mother" (Tuthill 16). The aunt replies with reassurance of her instincts as a mother, and how she will eventually know how to handle her infant, resulting in a gained confidence. "The All-wise Creator has doubtless given to woman the instinct necessary for the care and preservation of her offspring" (Tuthill 19). The quotation illustrates the pressure put on a mother to handle any hardships they may face as becoming a mother is their calling in life. Although the acknowledgement of the importance of a mother's instincts is presented, the advice does not give a practical solution to help a mother who is struggling. Tuthill's manual expresses how emotions are the first form of communication a mother has with her infant. Here, pressure is put on a

mother to gain control of her own emotional wellbeing. “The emotions are in activity before any communication can be directly held with the infant in words, or even by looks” (Tuthill 41). As with the other manuals analyzed thus far, there is a lack of advice on what to do when those emotions are unmanageable. Such an idea further idealized a mother’s ability to overcome emotional hardships. It can be argued that this advice inadequately equipped mothers to confront the challenges in motherhood, but rather it idealized the idea that a mother was inherently endowed to handle adversity.

The advice manual entitled *The Mother at Home* (1833) by John S.C. Abbott from earlier in the nineteenth century also centers its advice on the idealized behaviour that was expected among mothers throughout the nineteenth century. It focuses on the importance of the mother’s influence on a child in the early years of childhood. It can be seen that the manual reinforces the blame placed on mothers if they did not adhere to the advice provided by Abbott. Throughout the manual, the importance of a mother’s authority over her children is emphasized. Abbott suggests the mother is at fault if the child resists her guidance. “Thus, instead of appealing to her own supreme authority, she is appealing to the reason of the child, and, under these circumstances, the child of course refuses to submit” (Abbott 28). Abbott continues to tell the story of a mother who was not able to govern the hard emotions of a stubborn child who refused to take medicine. Abbott concludes that without the authority of the mother, the sick child died. Abbott expresses how the mother is at fault for the child’s death:

The efforts which are made to induce a stubborn child to take medicine, often produces such an excitement, as entirely to counteract the effect of the

prescription; and thus is a mother often called to weep over the grave of her child, simply because she has not taught that child to obey. (Abbott 29)

The blame Abbott expresses highlights the pressure put on mothers to uphold the idealized role of a mother who can govern and control their child with ease. Abbott's suggestions that the mother is to blame if a child is not obeying creates a biased representation that every child will be willing to follow authority, and that getting a child to do as they are told is a simple task. Abbott fails to offer guidance for mothers who may be struggling with challenges related to their child's obedience. The scare tactic of positioning the death of a child in relation to a mother as being a failure to have authority does not sufficiently prepare a mother for handling this type of hardship. Rather it presents the mother as a failure if she cannot achieve authority. Abbott's manual fosters generalizations that a mother is able to successfully govern all situations with ease. Such an expectation is reinforcing unattainable standards for motherhood as it assumes every mother will be successful if she is authoritative.

Another manual that reinforces fear and blame in a mother in order to control her mental state is the advice manual entitled *Painless Childbirth; or Healthy Mothers, and Healthy Children. A Book for All Women* by John H. Dye published in 1889. Dye's manual covers the journey of motherhood from pregnancy, childbirth, to the childrearing years. In the section titled "Maternity" the manual suggests that certain impressions of the mental state can affect the unborn child through the transfer of blood of the mother.

No one will attempt to deny that during pregnancy the mother is unusually susceptible to external impressions; and in view of the assimilated evidence, we regard it safe to state that any external circumstances that is capable of making

profound or prolonged impression on the mother, may, through the blood or sympathy, affect the child in utero. (Dye 42-3)

While stress may affect a mother, the advice leads her to believe that she is going to harm her unborn baby if she is not consistently maintaining a state of tranquility. By positioning emotional hardships as something that is a negative characteristic of a mother, and without advice on how to overcome these, Dye successfully reinforces the unachievable maternal ideals that women would strive to attain during the Victorian era.

The advice manual titled *Maidenhood and Motherhood, or, Ten Phases of Woman's Life : How to Protect the Health, Contribute to the Physical and Mental Development, and Increase the Happiness of Womankind* by John D. West, published in 1887 includes advice that exerts pressure on mothers to conform to the idealized mother figure. The chapter entitled “Influence of the Mind on the Milk” suggests that a mother’s emotions can influence the quality of her breast milk.

Intense grief, mental anxiety, paroxysms of passion, or any long-continued or violent emotions of the mind, are, unquestionably, causes of considerable deterioration in the milk. . .Severe infantile vomitings, or even general convulsions, have been known to result from applying the child to the breast immediately after experienc[ing] any intense mental excitement – whether of an exhilarating or depressing character. . .It is a general remark that children nursed by females who are laboring under intense grief or mental anxiety of any kind seldom thrive. (West 523)

Here, it is evident that a struggling mother is being blamed for the wellbeing of her child. West suggests that a mother’s emotions can negatively affect an infant through the

mother's breast milk. The perspective underscores shortcomings in a mother's ability to have control over her emotions instead of offering guidance to help her manage them. West positions a struggling mother as someone who is guilty of harming their child. Such an outlook places blame on a mother for something that may be out of her control, while failing to give practical advice on how to aid her through mental hardships she may be facing. West's manual reinstates the idealized mother figure by acknowledging that a display of mental or emotional struggles in motherhood is not accepted and can cause harm to a child. Such an example reinforces the idea that a mother should always retain a composed and level-headed emotional state while providing inadequate guidance on how to accomplish this.

A common theme throughout the manuals published in the nineteenth century is how the mental state of a mother was believed to have a direct impact on her infant's well-being. The preconception created societal pressure for a mother to consistently regulate their emotions and always maintain a state of mental tranquility. Such a portrayal developed a false representation of the experience of motherhood. It downplayed the reality of challenges, while reinforcing blame directed at mothers, ignoring the complexity and struggles that motherhood can bring. It fostered a false ideal of motherhood, while simultaneously suppressing certain emotions in front of their own children. Along with suppressing the realistic experience of motherhood by failing to acknowledge the full spectrum of emotions, the perspective also results in limiting a child's ability to effectively manage and navigate challenging emotions as they would lack a model of emotional regulation through their mother. This sheltered a child from learning how to overcome difficult emotions. The pressure to uphold the idealized mother

figure in the Victorian era created a distortion of authenticity in many aspects of a mother's life, as well as their child's. The pressure created an environment in which a mother's role was shaped by the idealized mother figure, rather than her individual reality.

Although not an advice manual for mothers, Christina Rossetti's *Sing-Song* reveals the emotional landscape of motherhood in adversity, without the constraint that the expectations of the idealized mother entail. Unlike the advice manuals also written during the nineteenth century, *Sing-Song* allows for a full expression and acceptance of a mother's experience through hardships such as infant death. I argue that Rossetti strays from the societal expectations of presenting and reinforcing the figure of a mother who appears to always have control of her emotions and instead exposes her emotional vulnerabilities in an accessible place for both mother and child to witness. Unlike the advice manuals published for mothers, Rossetti acknowledges the challenges faced in motherhood as an inherent and normal aspect of the experience.

Along with the advice manuals failing to bring normalcy to emotional struggle in motherhood, it was also deemed unacceptable for children to be exposed to an array of emotions that specifically coincide with the experience of infant death. Reviewer and librarian Annie Spencer Cutter reviewed a new 1924 edition of Rossetti's children's poetry *Sing-Song and Other Poems for Children* in an article in the *Elementary English Review* (1925), a journal publication used by elementary school teachers in the early twentieth century. Cutter acknowledged that the accessible approach that Rossetti takes for mother and child to learn about adverse emotions such as those related to infant death were not often received well.

The book is a welcome addition to the too limited number of books of poetry for very little children. In it we do not have any trace of that melancholy spirit that loved to sing of death but “simply a child’s mood, a child’s fancies and ideas set to song.” (295)

In this second volume of the *Elementary English Review*, Cutter observes that the poems touching on infant death by Rossetti were seen as morbid and inappropriate for children. In the new edition “[c]are has been taken to retain only those having gayety of spirit and expressing the joyousness of a child’s life and to exclude the mournful almost morbid note found in so many of the verses in the original collection” (Cutter 294). This act of excluding the topic of infant death in children’s literature coincides with how advice manuals on motherhood did not present a mother experiencing adverse emotions in terms of normalcy. With the exclusion of such emotional acknowledgement, it is obvious that the idealized mother figure was what was the accepted norm during the nineteenth century. *Sing-Song* demonstrates Christina Rossetti’s progressive approach with these topics and how she challenged the idealized mother figure in her children’s poetry. Rossetti was exposing struggle instead of hiding it.

Unlike the advice manuals that do not offer a nuanced representation or acceptance regarding a mother and her emotions, I propose that Rossetti acknowledges hardships faced in motherhood and suggests an awareness that they will pass in time. An example from Rossetti’s *Sing-Song* is her poem titled “What are heavy? Sea-sand and Sorrow” demonstrates this:

What are heavy? Sea-sand and sorrow:

What are brief? To-day ad to-morrow:

What are frail? Spring blossoms and youth:

What are deep? The ocean and truth. (Rossetti 1-4)

The poem confronts the heaviness of life, while also counterintuitively presenting faith that when faced with the “heavy” there will also come relief. Rossetti emphasizes that the hard times will pass. I propose that the poem was written to act as comfort for a mother going through a difficult time. Rossetti discusses difficulties or hardships within motherhood in a way that does not lay blame on the mother experiencing them. Rossetti’s depiction captures the role of a mother who faces ups and downs. She recognizes the importance of the conversation surrounding the struggles of motherhood and demonstrates the challenges from both a child and adult perspective as seen in the poem. Rossetti, unlike the common Victorian mother’s manuals does not try to control the narrative of how a mother deals with hardships or emotional turmoil, but rather opens the conversation to topics like infant death to show compassion towards the mother. She strays from idealizing this mother figure who is expected to have it all together.

Christina Rossetti’s ability to show these hardships or unpredictable aspects of motherhood without blame help create a place for a mother to seek reassurance if struggling. Unlike the advice manuals that represent emotional struggle as having a negative effect on a child, Rossetti can present it as a learning opportunity on how to overcome hardships as can be seen in her poem “What are heavy? Sea-sand and Sorrow:”. Here Rossetti represents the emotions and hardships of a mother to highlight the more accurate experience of motherhood. Rossetti demonstrates challenges in motherhood by using words such as “heavy”, “frail”, “brief”, and “deep”. These words represent hardships and bring normalcy to the adverse emotions a mother may face. As

demonstrated in this poem in *Sing-Song*, Christina Rossetti represents struggle, creating a platform to sufficiently acknowledge hardships in motherhood.

Throughout the advice manuals, a mother's maternal instinct was represented as an unreliable source with regard to the caring for one's baby. These manuals emphasized the importance of following their advice as opposed to the mother's own maternal instincts, therefore diminishing her confidence. In contrast, Rossetti chooses to represent the power of a mother's maternal instincts in the poem "A Motherless Soft Lambkin".

A motherless soft lambkin
 Along up a hill;
 No mother's fleece to shelter him
 And wrap him from the cold:--
 I'll run to him and comfort him,
 I'll fetch him, that I will;
 I'll care for him and feed him
 Until he's strong and bold. (Rossetti 1-8)

Here, a lamb that has lost its mother is represented. It speaks to the instinctual response a mother would show a child, which consequently teaches the child audience the importance of maternal instinctual love. The lines "I'll care for him and feed him / Until he's strong and bold." (Rossetti 7-8) represent the unconditional maternal instincts of caring for and loving a child. Rossetti emphasizes that the lamb will grow to be "strong and bold.", underscoring that a mother's instincts are an important part of raising a child. This can be contrasted with the recommendation of the advice manuals written for mothers, specifically Henry Pye Chavasse in "*Chavasse's Advice to a Mother on the*

Management of Her Children” in which Chavasse makes the bold statement that maternal instincts cannot displace the role of a physician (Chavasse vii). I contend that although a physician is a necessary resource in many instances, the broad generalization that Chavasse expresses regarding maternal instincts as an insufficient tool for raising a healthy child undermines the importance of a nurturing bond between a mother and child. It therefore undercuts the importance of a relationship that is essential for a child’s developmental well-being. It also represents the stripping of a mother’s intuition and instinctual love to mold her into following the strictures of a mother’s advice manual. In turn, it functions to generalize a mother’s experience, creating an idealized figure that women during the Victorian era strove to achieve.

Jan Marsh, in *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography* (1995), states that the rhymes in Rossetti’s *Sing-Song* show mothers and children how to deal with pain (Marsh 380). This contrasts with the maternal advice manuals, specifically John C. Abbot’s manual *The Mother at Home*, that positioned the mother as an authoritarian figure in relation to their child. The reading experience in Rossetti’s poems in *Sing-Song* allow both mother and child to come together to discuss an array of topics pertaining to motherhood and childhood. Rossetti’s poems in *Sing-Song* thus foster the connection of mother and child as opposed to reinforcing an authoritative parent figure. The work thus helps strengthen the connection between mother and child. These poems as a whole serve as a representation of the emotional complexities that exist within the world of motherhood and childhood.

Through representing both motherhood and childhood, *Sing-Song* harnesses the connection of mother and child while subsequently avoiding the representation of an

authoritative relationship. I suggest that this connects to the instinctual maternal love that Rossetti represents throughout her poetry. Therefore, *Sing-Song* shows both hardships and happiness in order to represent the unconditional love of mother and child. The acknowledgement of hardships throughout *Sing-Song* reinforces the absence of the kind of idealized mother figure that is depicted in the maternal advice manuals. An example of the range of emotional turmoil and hardship that can exist within childhood and motherhood is depicted in Rossetti's poem titled "If All Were Rain and Never Sun":

If all were rain and never sun,
 No bow could span the hill;
 If all were sun and never rain,
 There'd be no rainbow still. (Rossetti 1-4)

Rossetti uses rain and sun to symbolize the emotional fluctuations that one may encounter in life. The juxtaposition of rain and sun represents the importance of adversity holding significance in one's life, just as joyous moments do, creating a sense of normalcy surrounding struggle. Rossetti's *Sing-Song* contrasts with the narrative presented in the maternal advice manuals that fail to represent a mother demonstrating emotional struggle. Without placing blame on the mother for facing hardships, Rossetti reassures the reader that one will overcome them, demonstrating to a mother that hardships in motherhood will not last. A realistic viewpoint for motherhood of motherhood is created, while also including the child audience in this narrative by advertising the poem as a child's poem.

Sing-Song presents an opportunity to focus on the mother and child relationship. The manuals as mentioned earlier in this chapter focus on the impressions that a mother's

mental health can have on their infant. It is up to the mother to control their own emotions; otherwise, this will cause harm to their own infant. In her poem “Blind From My Birth” it is my interpretation that the poem does not represent a newborn baby, but rather a first-time mother entering her new role. The poem shows the adverse emotions that take place during birth.

Blind from my birth,
 Where flowers are springing
 I sit on earth
 All dark.
 Hark! hark!
 A lark is singing.
 His notes are all for me,
 For me his mirth :-
 Till some day I shall see
 Beautiful flowers
 And birds in bowers
 Where all Joy Bells are ringing. (Rossetti 1-12)

Rather than suggesting the baby’s perspective, the poem expresses the state of euphoria one enters after giving birth. The mother is blind to what they just experienced due to the happiness of meeting their baby. The line “Where flowers are springing” compares the baby to flowers creating an image of a very happy and beautiful result of birth. The poem then implies a darkness in comparison to the happy baby. The lines “I sit on earth / All dark” position the mother in a state of emotional hardship. Such an example could refer

to complications in birth, or the emotional struggle that can be experienced in postpartum. The poem mentions that a lark is singing. The metaphor of the lark represents the reminder to find joy in one's life (Badmaev 143). Such an idea can be compared to the juxtaposition of the rain and sun in the poem "If All Were Rain and Never Sun." Initially, the poem "Blind at My Birth" introduces the reader to darkness, while then mentioning the singing lark that signifies joy. It is as though the lark is waking the mother up with its song in order to acknowledge the passing of hardships. This image can be interpreted as a representation of adversity and joy throughout motherhood. The way in which Rossetti acknowledges adversity in motherhood represents a realistic view of a mother, therefore, contrasting from the generalized expectations put on mothers that exists within the advice manuals.

Rossetti's ability to normalize all experiences of motherhood continues with her use of the future tense. She appears to look to the healing that will take place for the mother, if presently struggling. The narrative does not blame a mother for struggling, but rather patiently allows suffering in motherhood. In the line "Till some day I shall see / Beautiful flowers." The concept of the future symbolizing beauty underscores the duality of the postpartum experience. The future tense Rossetti uses regarding seeing beautiful flowers, suggests that the mother is unable presently to acknowledge the beauty of motherhood. Here, it is emphasized how postpartum has its lows and highs and suggests that the mother will eventually understand and be able to embrace the adverse experience of becoming a mother.

In contrast to the idealized mother figure, Christina Rossetti's *Sing-Song: A Children's Nursery Rhyme Book* offers a realistic view of mental health challenges in

motherhood. With this, Rossetti created an accessible place for a mother to find comfort through the ups and downs of motherhood. The advice manuals analyzed throughout this chapter supported the idealized mother figure through their lack of acknowledgement that a mother may struggle or express adverse emotions throughout her motherhood experience. The generalized expectation of motherhood placed blame on mothers, resulting in an unachievable expectation for a mother's mental health. Consequently, although advertised as a children's book, *Sing-Song* becomes a space where a mother is able to articulate struggles that may be faced in motherhood. Ultimately, *Sing-Song* deconstructs the idealized mother figure, offering a more nuanced and forgiving representation of motherhood.

Painting the Truth: The Representation of Maternal Mental Health Through Illustration

Sing-Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book contains over one hundred short poems that coincide with the ups and downs of childhood. These experiences range from playful day-to-day fun to hardships such as grief due to infant death. The poems are partnered with illustrations by Arthur Hughes, the pre-Raphaelite artist. These illustrations support visual literacy, or a way for the reader to understand the message of the poems through illustrations. In other words, this could serve as a child-friendly way to discuss complex topics such as death. The illustrations and the words on each page work together to foster the parent-child relationship and the understanding of hardships on the part of the mother and child. Through the interplay of poetry and illustrations, *Sing-Song* portrays a nuanced motherhood experience that focuses on a struggling mother. The work therefore, challenges the idealization of motherhood by acknowledging a range of emotions a mother may experience throughout motherhood in a child-accessible format. *Sing-Song* offers these insights to a child audience through storytelling, therefore representing a non-idealized mother figure to the child.

The illustrations by Arthur Hughes bring a second layer of understanding of the emotions that are being expressed through the poetry in *Sing-Song*. The storytelling present in the illustrations would resonate with both the adult and child audience. The emotions depicted in *Sing-Song* are amplified, helping to facilitate the communication of complex adult themes such as a mother's emotions surrounding infant death, to a child. L. J. Kooistra writes about the image and text connection in *Sing-Song* in her article "The Dialogue of Image and Text in Christina Rossetti's *Sing Song*" (1999). Kooistra

emphasizes how the illustrations and the words within the poems create much “more than a picture book for children” (Kooistra 466). The partnership of illustrations and poetry, as Kooistra explains creates an accessible place for both the child and the mother reading the poems to discuss emotions within the realm of childhood. Although Kooistra argues that Rossetti focuses on childhood in *Sing-Song*, I argue that Rossetti focuses on the world of the mother, and her emotions. *Sing-Song* becomes a place where a mother and child can openly discuss the emotions that accompany motherhood, therefore fostering a relationship that honours discussion and understanding surrounding mental health. *Sing-Song* enhances the connection between mother and child, encouraging the validation of emotions, instead of ignoring them. Throughout *Sing-Song* and the dual perspective gained through visual literacy both the mother and child unite to work through hardships such as death. *Sing-Song* helps the mother to mourn openly and to not hide any emotional turmoil from their own child who they might be reading these rhymes to.

An example of visual literacy in *Sing-Song* that exposes a mother’s emotional turmoil is the poem “Motherless Baby and Babyless Mother”. The illustration shows a mother kneeling at a small grave. She is dressed in black (see figure 6). The black dress can indicate mourning. There is a nurse who is also dressed in black with a white apron and bonnet. She is standing on the other side of the grave holding a newborn baby wrapped in a white blanket. The mother has her arms open, reaching for the small baby, while the nurse is handing the baby to the mother. The baby is also reaching its arms toward the mother that is receiving them.



Figure 6. “Motherless Baby and Babyless Mother” from Christina Rossetti’s *Sing-Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book*. London, Routledge and Sons, 1872, p 130.

In terms of the reading experience, the illustration acts as a conversation starter. A child looking at the picture might have questions that could open a discussion between a mother and her child. The mother could easily explain about infant death while referring to what exactly is going on in the illustration, and how the mother and child in the image are reaching for one to foster healing after loss. The image shows the mourning mother at her baby’s grave, being given a newborn baby that has just lost their mother during childbirth. The mother’s face depicts expressions of melancholy. There is no smile, but with open mouth and eyes locked on the baby being handed to her, it is clear she is filling a void that has been detrimental to her emotional wellbeing.

The black and white sketching used in the image complements the themes conveyed in the poem, enhancing its overall visual impact. The contrasting black sketching represents mourning, while the void areas of white can represent hope. Additionally, the nurse’s black dress further underscores the mother’s association with

grief. However, the nurse wears a white apron and collar that sharply contrast with the black dresses. It is my interpretation that the white apron covers the black dress to imply faith will overcome one's mourning. The white spaces draw the eye to the baby wrapped in the white blanket, who is not wearing clothes. Here it is indicated that the baby was just born. The white blanket may represent hope and a new beginning for the mother. With the gesture of the mother reaching for the child and given the lack of any contact between the black fabric of her dress and the infant symbolizes the purity of this new beginning. The mother's white arms and cuffs together with the baby wrapped in the white blanket, suggest a symbolic connection. Such a concept can be seen to initiate the healing process for both the mother and child once they unite. The poem reinforces this idea as in the line that reads "bring them together to love one another" (Rossetti 2), implying that loving one another will heal both the mother and the baby.

The position of the mother over the grave represents the enduring memory of the baby the mother has lost. The visibility of the child's grave reinforces that the loss is not to be forgotten, but rather instead be acknowledged and processed as part of the healing journey for the mother. It demonstrates to the child assessing these illustrations that the new baby is not replacing the baby that died, but rather showing how a mother is able to feel sadness and hope simultaneously. Hughes's visual storytelling in "Motherless Baby and Babyless Mother" aligns closely with the message conveyed in the poem that despite experiencing emotional distress from the loss of a child, a mother's love continues to endure. Therefore, through the work of the illustration *Sing-Song* represents the challenging emotional content a mother may endure while accompanied by the assurance that the future offers the potential for healing. The illustrations deconstruct the idealized

mother figure as seen in the maternal advice manuals by challenging the stricture that a mother cannot feel adverse emotions in order to be considered a good mother. This offers to the child a normalization of the emotional complexity a mother may express or experience.

Rossetti's *Sing-Song Nursery Rhyme Book* explores the raw emotions of motherhood instead of hiding them, as would be expected in the upholding or reinforcement of the idealized mother figure. In reviewing the poetry in *Sing-Song*, R.A. Bellas, author of *Christina Rossetti* (1977) started by critiquing the title of Rossetti's poetry collection. "A nursery Rhyme Book, suggests a collection of rhymes for nursery-aged children . . . they frequently are directed to older children and even adults" (Bellas 91). Bellas states that the collection is not meant for young children as it focuses on adult topics such as death. However, Bellas fails to mention the illustrations that accompany the poetry. I propose that the partnership of the illustrations by Arthur Hughes and the poetry by Christina Rossetti fosters an appropriate reception of the topic of death by both child and adult audience. The illustrations that accompany the poems on death effectively engage a child's understanding through visual literacy.

Bellas continues to undermine Rossetti's choice of topics, while still not commenting on the whole picture of the poetry in relation to the illustrations. "The poems on the theme of death – and there are many – tend to be moralistic and are undistinguished" (Bellas 97). Bellas states that the poems pertaining to death acknowledge the hardship, but that they do not particularly offer a unique representation of the emotions surrounding the experiencing of death. In contrast, the poems viewed in relation to the illustrations offer a much more nuanced representation of the experience

Rossetti is trying to portray through her poetry. While *Sing-Song* may initially appear simplistic due to the length of each rhyme, Bellas ignores an important aspect of Rossetti's message that exists between the poetry and accompanying illustrations. An example is demonstrated in "Our Little Baby Fell Asleep" (See figure 7).

Our little baby fell asleep,
 And may not wake again
 For days and days, and weeks and weeks;
 But then he'll wake again,
 And come with his own pretty look,
 And kiss Mamma again. (Rossetti 1-6)



Figure 7. "Our Little Baby Fell Asleep" from Christina Rossetti's *Sing-Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book*. London, Routledge and Sons, 1872, p 4.

The poem is about a baby dying in their sleep. The words within the poem do not specifically say the baby has died, but rather that they fell asleep and did not wake. The

poem itself allows for confusion on the part of the child audience as to whether the child is sleeping or has died. When accompanied by the illustrations it is clear that the baby has died as the image interprets the poem by depicting an angel carrying the child to heaven from their cradle. The poem and the illustration demonstrate together the message being conveyed. I argue that with the interplay of the poem and the illustration the child audience is better able to comprehend infant death. The combination of the poem and illustration portrays a peaceful image of death, as evident by the angel's protective hold on the baby in the illustration. The illustration reassures the child that the baby is at peace, and death should not be feared. Bellas fails to acknowledge the significance of the relationship of the illustration and text that Rossetti and Hughes meticulously developed in *Sing-Song*. As can be seen in the manuscript of *Sing-Song* Rossetti pre-sketched what she wished to accompany her poems (Kooistra 466). In *Christina Rossetti, a Divided Life* (1981), Georgina Battiscombe acknowledged how simply Rossetti conveyed the message of her poems. "Her images, in comparison with those of Hughes, have a primitive simplicity" (Battiscombe 552). Rossetti's ideas for Hughes' illustrations were simple and straightforward, with Hughes picking up on the nuances of Rossetti's vision. The illustrations were purposeful and well thought out by Rossetti herself which emphasizes the importance of how the illustrations and the poetry work together. By failing to consider this relationship, Bellas overlooks the depth of the emotional discourse presented in *Sing-Song*, thereby missing the acknowledgement that both illustration and text contribute to the readers experience collectively.

Along with the lack of recognition of the emotional depth presented throughout *Sing-Song*, Bellas argues that the poems on infant death have no place in a nursery rhyme

book as these are purely adult themes that children should not be bothered with. Bellas' view of the poems can be connected to preconceived expectations placed on women in motherhood as seen in the advice manuals. The advice manuals analyzed in Chapter Two of this thesis represent the expectation that a mother maintain a composed persona in all aspects of motherhood. Christina Rossetti is able to represent an array of emotions experienced in motherhood through the poetry and the illustrations by Arthur Hughes. As expressed in *Chavasse's Advice to a Mother on the Management of Her Children* (1898), infant death was a common tragedy during the Victorian era (Chavasse 4). Although Bellas' biographical review post-dates the Victorian era, he similarly fails to acknowledge this, specifically in not considering how common infant death was during this era. In acknowledging a hardship faced by many in motherhood during the Victorian Era, Rossetti was creating a place for both mother and child to understand infant death.

In 1872 critic Sidney Colvin writes of the dual perspective of the adult and child audience in *Sing-Song*, and how Rossetti is successful at presenting the two within a book of short rhymes.

The poetry book answers literally to its time and consists of nothing but short rhymes as simple in sound as those immemorially sung in nurseries . . . and having always a music suited to baby ears, though sometimes a depth of pathos or suggestion far enough transcending baby apprehension. (Colvin 23)

Colvin argues that given this dual perspective, some of the poems suggest messages that extend far beyond the emotional comprehension of a child. Like Bellas, Colvin does not address the notion that the illustrations supplement the poetry in a way that helps the child audience understand what Colvin refers to as “a depth of pathos” (Colvin 23). This

lack of acknowledgement of the impact of the illustrations by both Bellas and Colvin undermines Rossetti's intent in *Sing-Song*. Without the consideration of the relationship of the text and illustration, *Sing-Song* becomes a book of poetry that seems as though it is out of touch with the child-audience. I contend that both Bellas and Colvin's critiques of *Sing-Song* lack the conceptualization of Rossetti's intent that the text be a place for both child and adult audience to comprehend the emotional discourse of a mother through poetry, as well as through visual literacy.

Sing-Song downplays the idealized mother figure by acknowledging a range of emotions a mother may experience throughout motherhood through illustrations that act as a form of visual literacy for the child to comprehend topics such as death, and the emotional hardships that accompany death. The storytelling in *Sing-Song* is equally as crucial as the written poems. Bellas and Colvin's critiques of Rossetti's *Sing-Song* as being inappropriate for the child-audience fail to capture the illustrations and poetry working together in order to create an understanding for both child and adult. The dual perspective that Rossetti intended in *Sing-Song* demonstrates the open conversation she fosters in raising complex questions such as those surrounding death. Through both forms of storytelling Rossetti chooses to allow a child to comprehend topics such as death implying that seemingly mature topics can be discussed with children. I argue that this was Rossetti's way of deconstructing the idealized mother figure to a child. Rossetti chose to allow comprehension of the emotional struggles that accompany a mother experiencing infant death on the part of the child. In this, it is acknowledged that an emotionally struggling mother was an image that does not complement the idealized mother figure during the Victorian era.

Finding Comfort Under the Wings of Angels: Bridging the Gap Between the Spiritual and Physical World

Throughout *Sing-Song* Christina Rossetti acknowledges difficult topics such as infant death in a manner that is age-appropriate for a child, through rhyme and illustration. In addition, Rossetti incorporates religious perspectives to offer comfort and reassurance to a child while also humanizing the mother in contrast to the idealized mother figure of the Victorian era. Religion, specifically in the presence of angels, is used in *Sing-Song* to bridge a gap between the unknown of the spiritual world, and the physical world. In the illustration that accompanies the poem “Our Little Baby Fell Asleep”, the angel acts as a replacement for a mother in the way that the angel expresses maternal love and protection to the child who has passed away. Such a concept of the protection of an angel over a child who is no longer in the physical world brings solace and ease to a child concerning death and the many unknowns that may accompany this topic.

The opening poem in *Sing-Song*, “Angels At The Foot” represents the protective, motherly love that Rossetti also demonstrates in the form of angels (see figure 8). The illustration and poetry bring comfort to the child reading the poem who may not be able to fully grasp the concept of death.

Angels at the foot,
And angels at the head,
And like a curly little lamb
My pretty babe in bed. (Rossetti 1-4)



Figure 8. “Angels At The Foot” from Christina Rossetti’s *Sing-Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book*. London, Routledge and Sons, 1872, p 1.

The poem depicts the angels as having a protective role over the child who is asleep in their bed. The idea of the angels at both ends of the bed “Angels at the foot, / And angels at the head” (Rossetti 1-2), implies a totality of protection. These lines within the poem bring comfort to the child reading the poem in understanding that the angels will protect and care for the child just as a mother would. Here it can be seen to instill reassurance to the child on death, a topic that can represent many unknowns.

Hughes’s illustration for “Angels at the Foot” reveals a cradle with four angels peering in at the baby. The angels represent different life stages. The diverse ages of the angels symbolize protection throughout different stages of childhood, again, implying the totality of protection of the infant in the form of motherly love, bringing comfort to the reader.

The idea of angels embodying a motherly love can be linked to the relationship that Christina Rossetti and her mother Frances Rossetti shared. As explained in the biographical text *Learning Not to Be First: The Life of Christina Rossetti* (1992) Kathleen Jones mentions how Rossetti faced illness and trying times during childhood

and into adulthood. Rossetti's childhood illness resulted in her becoming dependent on her own mother more so than her siblings had been (Jones 156). Sickbert emphasizes the dedication that the two women demonstrated to one another:

As women they served each other: Mrs. Rossetti nursed Rossetti through her various illnesses, copying out her poems when the poet was too ill to hold a pen; Rossetti nursed her mother until her final illness, often writing out Mrs. Rossetti's letters from dictation and making the final entry in Frances' diary. (Sickbert 386)

As a result of the close and selfless relationship Rossetti shared with her mother, she was able to capture in her poetry the unconditional motherly love that exists for a mother and her child. Rossetti's perspective clarifies how her relationship with her mother helps to create a sense of comfort for her child audience. In "Angels at the Foot" and the accompanying illustration, the presence of different age groups among the angels suggest that the love of a mother follows one all the way to adulthood, just as Rossetti experienced with her own mother.

The opening poem of *Sing-Song* alludes to a nurturing and loving spiritual afterlife, emphasizing the importance of religion in *Sing-Song*. The poem immediately reveals to the reader that religious undertones will be present throughout the book. To begin the book with an illustration and poem on the comfort of angels looking out for one in all life's stages presents the religious undertones that exist throughout the book of rhymes. Rossetti reveals that angels will be looking out for a mother's baby and that the mother is not alone in the care of her child. Rossetti is able bring comfort to the mother regarding the unknown of the future for her child.

In contrast to the opening poem “Angels at the Foot” that represents the presence of angels, the last poem of the collection is titled “Lie a-bed” (See figure 9) which refers to the mother of the child in the poem. In place of the angels that are depicted in “Angels at the Foot”, a mother is presented admiring her baby asleep in its cradle in “Lie a-bed”, thus consequently supporting my argument that angels serve as a way to embody the maternal affection of a mother.

Lie a-bed

Sleepy head,

Shut up eyes, bo-peep;

Till daybreak

Never wake:--

Baby, sleep. (Rossetti 1-6)



Figure 9 “Lie a-bed” from Christina Rossetti’s *Sing-Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book*. London, Routledge and Sons, 1872, p 135.

The subject of sleep is discussed in the poem and demonstrated through the illustration. The illustration to “Lie a-bed” by Arthur Hughes shares similarities with the

first illustrations that accompany the poem “Angels at the Foot”. In the place of angels the poem “Lie-a-bed”, in place of angels, illustrates a mother peering over the side of the cradle admiring her sleeping baby. Here Rossetti’s connecting of the maternal affections is seen as the mother in “Lie-a-bed” has taken place of the angels in “Angels at the Foot”, therefore re-instating Rossetti’s intentions to reinforce the image of angels in the spiritual world and comparing these to maternal affections in the physical world. Rossetti’s ability to demonstrate how one’s mother can replace four angels shows the importance and strength of a mother’s love for a child. Throughout *Sing-Song*, Rossetti emphasizes how an infant who has passed away will be protected and comforted by angels that symbolize a mother’s love. Such an idea may serve as a comforting thought for both the child and adult audience of *Sing-Song*. Rossetti effectively demonstrates how religion, in the form of angels becomes a helpful tool through times of hardship.

The subtle utilization of religion that Christina Rossetti employs in her poetry through angels emphasizes that her verse does not necessarily depend on one specific religion, but rather uses faith as a way to bring comfort to her readers. Rossetti links faith with the maternal role of the angels to demonstrate how belief can suggest that the mother is not alone in the hardships of motherhood.

On the study of children’s poetry, in *The Aesthetics of Children’s Poetry: A Study of Children’s Verse in English* (2018) critics Katherine Wakely-Mulroney and Louise Joy acknowledge the faith that exists among the pages of *Sing-Song*. “*Sing-Song* is not a collection of religious verse, but its poems are premised on a reserved yet unwavering faith in God” (Wakely-Mulroney, et al. 141). The contrast of organized religion versus faith can be seen in *Sing-Song*. I argue that Rossetti’s approach does not press a certain

religious practice on her readers such as prayer or attending worship, but rather that she presents faith as a universal form of healing. Rossetti represents faith in her poems in a way that is relatable to a child, while also bringing reassurance to the mother. Rossetti's ability to bridge the gap between the spiritual world and the physical world with faith, while not specifically preaching specific religious practices emphasizes her ability to appeal to many different audiences. The presence of religion in *Sing-Song* creates a sense of comfort for the mother and the child in reading Rossetti's poems on death.

Rossetti use of religion to comfort her reader can be seen in the poem "Baby Lies so Fast Asleep". Throughout this poem, it is evident that Rossetti is representing the totality of care that the angels will give a child who has died. "Will the angels clad in white; / Fly from heaven to take her?" (Rossetti 3-4). Here Rossetti suggests that the angels take the child who has died to the spiritual world, and that their spirit will continue to be remembered even if they are not physically here. This in turn could be interpreted by a young audience as a way to find comfort in the memory of the infant who has passed. As a result, this brings the reader or listener reassurance about healing through hardship. The line "Kiss her once and leave her" (Rossetti 8) emphasizes the protection and love that the infant who has died will experience in the spiritual world. Here it can be seen that this would give the child, likely the sibling reading the poem, the reassurance and faith that their sibling will still experience maternal protection and love. It is also clear that the sibling or reader is allowed to show their love and mourning with a kiss. This serves as an offering of faith to the child and mother to let them know that this time of loss and grief will pass. It alludes to the fact that the baby will not be forgotten, but time moves forward. The way in which Rossetti acknowledges adverse emotions that a

mother and or child will experience manifests or represents the concept of the non-idealized mother figure. The idealized mother of the Victorian era was encouraged to represent an image of perfection. In contrast to this Victorian image of maternal perfection, Rossetti explores the emotions of both mother and child acknowledging and working through the emotional strain associated with death.

The poems of *Sing-Song* on infant death are intended for an adult and child audience. The poem “Baby Lies Fast Asleep” can be seen as intended for a child’s understanding of death, while Rossetti’s poem titled “Motherless Baby” interprets a complex situation for a mother that represents both death and healing for the maternal audience.

Motherless baby and babyless mother,

Bring them together to love one another. (Rossetti 1-2)

Although a close analysis of “Motherless Baby and Babyless Mother” was presented earlier regarding the storytelling through the illustration, the text of the poem also demonstrates faith while implying that the difficult time will pass. The short poem shows hardships, while also offering a solution. The “Motherless Baby and Babyless Mother” poem functions as a place for the mother and child reading the poem to discuss difficult topics. Rossetti represents a heartbreaking situation and simplifies it in a two-line poem. The complex situation in “Motherless Baby and Babyless Mother” exposes the mother’s emotions through the illustration by showing a mother surrendering to the pain that is felt with the loss of her baby. The realistic insight into a mother’s painful emotions does not idealize her, yet it humanizes her. The illustration (see figure 6) shows sad and

heartbreaking emotions, not just the joyous ones that would be expected of the idealized mother figure during the Victorian era.

On the topic of infant death in “Motherless Baby and Babyless Mother”, Rossetti emphasizes the emotional turmoil and mourning a mother might feel. The last line of the poem “Bring them together to love one another” (Rossetti 2) alludes to the fact that healing will eventually take place in direct correlation to the power of executing a mother’s maternal instincts of love. The poem expresses that the mother who has lost her baby will be able to love again, while the baby who lost its mother will do the same, resulting in healing a heart broken by death. The illustration of the mother in the poem who is lying next to her baby’s grave while accepting an orphaned baby implies that life moves forward and one can take the hurt with one, while still being able to move on. Rossetti simplifies a complex situation in order to express the power that a mother’s love has in difficult situations. Through the poem, Rossetti is able to bring a sense of easement to the child and adult audience on the complex topic of death.

The mother and child relationship that is represented throughout *Sing-Song* creates a nuanced look into a child’s mind. Here, the point of view is able to harbour the relationship between mother and child by helping to acknowledge both the adult and child-like perspective on the physical and spiritual world. Through Rossetti’s poetry, the child-like point of view allows a mother to gain insight into a child’s mind. This point of view upholds the Victorian ideal that a child was not the same as an adult, but rather needed age-appropriate acknowledgement and initiation into adult situations (Findlay 146). Rossetti brought light to the complex emotional responses surrounding infant death

and took these as an opportunity to present the topic to discuss it in an unreserved manner from a child's perspective. One sees this demonstrated in the poem "Why Did Baby Die"

Why did baby die,
 Making Father sigh,
 Mother cry?

 Flowers, that bloom to die,
 Make no reply
 Of "why?"
 But bow and die. (Rossetti 1-7)

Rossetti depicts the child's point of view on death in the poem. She presents questions that a child might have when witnessing a mother or father experiencing the emotions surrounding the death of their child. Rossetti engages with the proposition that often there are no answers to a baby dying. Here Rossetti bridges the gap of the unknown surrounding the spiritual world and physical world by comparing the baby who has passed away to a flower. The flower represents the baby in a way that suggests that a beautiful flower dies for seemingly unexplainable reasons. The flower metaphor can help to clarify the loss of an innocent baby to a child trying to understand what has happened. "Flowers, that bloom to die, / Make no reply / Of "why?" (Rossetti 4-6). By using the flower to explain the death of an infant, Rossetti shows how a child as opposed to an adult can experience the emotions surrounding death subjectively. Here, Rossetti creates an explanation through poetry that can be understood by a child. In the poem, religion is used as a mechanism to help foster a conversation about the spiritual world and why an innocent baby might leave the physical world. The poem, with its perspective into the

mind of a child dealing with hardship, allows the parent reading the poem to understand the feelings and questions their child might have pertaining to infant death. Such understanding creates a nuanced platform for open conversation between a child and mother while withholding judgement on the emotional response of both child and parent.

Another example where Rossetti uses faith as a way to heal is titled, “Baby Lies So Fast Asleep”:

Baby lies so fast asleep

That we cannot wake her:

Will the angels clad in white

Fly from heaven to take her?

Baby lies so fast asleep

That no pain can grieve her;

Put a snowdrop in her hand,

Kiss her once and leave her. (Rossetti 1-8)

The poem “Baby Lies So Fast Asleep”, like “Why Did Baby Die” asks the question of “Will the angels clad in white / Fly from heaven to take her?” (Rossetti 3-4). Rossetti’s use of a question emphasizes the unknowns of the spiritual world from the perspective of a child, while also offering an answer for the mother to give to the child. Here, the angel in question becomes a figure of comfort for the child, reassuring them that with death, protection and love does not stop for the deceased child. The angel in this poem represents maternal love that brings comfort to the child questioning death and the

spiritual world. “Why Did Baby Die” initiates the discussion on what occurs when an infant dies and does so in a manner that is accessible for a child.

The poem continues with a metaphor, “Put a snowdrop in her hand” (Rossetti 7). The symbolism of the snowdrop creates a sense of faith in the child listening to his mother read the poem. Snowdrops are known for their early emergence from earth after the winter, the first signs of life after snow (Azcarraga). The metaphor of the snowdrop symbolizes hope after adversity. In the context of the poem, there is hope that faith will alleviate the profound grief associated with death, just as after a harsh winter, there is hope of spring. The snowdrop metaphor facilitates the child’s understanding of how to overcome hardships; in this case the loss of a sibling. The approach Rossetti takes through the metaphor of the snowdrop addresses a child’s questions, while also helping the mother offer an answer to the child regarding death.

The closing line of the poem, “Kiss her once and leave her” (Rossetti 8) represents the love that exists for this baby, while collectively acknowledging how to move on from the death of a loved one. Rossetti demonstrates that in order to move on, one can convey love with a kiss as a way to say goodbye to the baby. Rossetti shows a child what happens with infant death in a way that focuses on the love for the baby, while also acknowledging that the baby will no longer physically be with them. The closing lines of this poem teach a lesson in a difficult situation; namely, that because of death, the deceased will no longer physically be present. Rossetti’s poem fosters a site of learning for a mother and child together on how to handle death and the questions that surround it as expressed by a child. The poem “Baby Lies So Fast Asleep” does not specifically mention religion or the presence of angels. It acknowledges the baby who has passed

away and implies that they will be leaving the physical world. The unknown of the spiritual world is acknowledged in a way that brings comfort to the child audience. The child is told to kiss the baby and leave them alluding to the fact that they will be taken care of where they are headed. It is evident through this closing line of the poem that Rossetti uses faith in *Sing-Song* to help a child's understanding of the physical world in contrast to the spiritual world. *Sing-Song* becomes a space of education on how to handle death, specifically infant death. Rossetti is able to bring comfort and reassurance to her reading audience of *Sing-Song* by expressing the powerful maternal love that a child will experience in both the physical and spiritual world both through memory, as well as the presence of angels. Rossetti is able to comfort to a child and adult audience on the topic of death and the many unknowns that can accompany this topic.

Throughout the Victorian era, motherhood was idealized. Through her poems in *Sing-Song* Christina Rossetti is able to humanize a mother by showing a range of emotions that a mother might go through when experiencing the death of her child. Rossetti is able to foster conversations pertaining to infant death that a child might have; while also offering answers with which a mother can reassure their own child. The teaching and comforting duality of the target audience in *Sing-Song* bring both child and mother together to talk openly about hardships, resulting in healing together through faith. Rossetti not only humanizes the mother figure by showing a range of emotions but is also able to represent the maternal love through the imagery of angels. The imagery brings comfort to a child on the topic of what might happen to the infant who has passed away when they are no longer in the physical world. Rossetti bridges the gap between the physical and spiritual world by embodying maternal love in the form of angels, resulting

in the reassurance that an infant entering the spiritual world will be protected and loved.

Sing-Song's use of religion brings both mother and child audience together in times of hardship in order to heal.

Decoding Sing-Song: A Place for Maternal Reassurance

Upon my initial reading of *Sing-Song*, I found comfort in a portrayal that acknowledged maternal struggle, an image often absent in traditional representations of motherhood both present and past. Rather than idealizing the mother as a person who is perpetually joyful, Rossetti presents a mother who experiences a more nuanced array of emotions. As a result, Rossetti created a space of empathy for a struggling mother, rather than a place of judgement. I believe that the lack of research pertaining to the mother in *Sing-Song* in relation to maternal mental health suggests a topic that has been overlooked yet one that is important to the maternal audience. I argue that *Sing-Song* is much more than a child's rhyming book and should be acknowledged as such.

By representing themes of loss, mourning, and maternal mental health, Rossetti offers a space for a mother's authentic experience. *Sing-Song* provides a subtle form of comfort for mothers, validating the emotional vulnerabilities inherent in the maternal experience. Ultimately, Rossetti challenges the cultural stereotype of the faultless mother and instead presents a more nuanced, humanized portrayal of motherhood. I claim that Rossetti's representation of the mother through poetry and illustration defies the Victorian ideals of motherhood that perceived a mother as "the angel in the house".

Rossetti is able to expose the idealization of motherhood by creating a space where this can be openly discussed by mother and child. The poetry brings both mother and child together over poetry, cultivating a space where the relationship is characterized by openness and emotional honesty. By representing maternal struggle in a manner that is accessible and appropriate for a child audience, Rossetti challenges prevailing Victorian norms that discouraged the discussion of hardship in motherhood. Instead, she creates a

space where mother and child can engage in conversations about life's difficulties. I argue that *Sing-Song* functions as a shared emotional space where the mother and child are encouraged to navigate the complexities of life together free from judgement.

In addition to social judgement as an influence on a mother's experience, maternal advice manuals of the nineteenth century also had a say. Although a helpful resource for aspects of pregnancy, dealing with a newborn, etc., the manuals failed to acknowledge the full range of emotional and psychological challenges that mothers might encounter. I argue that the limited representations of maternal mental health within the advice manuals (see appendix A) contributed to an idealized image of motherhood, through which mothers were expected to go through hardships with grace. With the lack of recognition for maternal mental health issues, mothers were left ill equipped through these manuals, therefore creating doubt amongst mother's who were struggling and making them feel judged if they were failing in their new role. In contrast, *Sing-Song* represents a realistic image of a mother experiencing hardships.

Along with *Sing-Song*'s nuanced representation of a mother's emotions, I argue that Arthur Hughes' illustrations offer a child-appropriate way to approach and understand complex subjects such as death. Through both the illustrations and poetry, *Sing-Song* becomes a site where both mother and child can have open discussions of the difficulties life may present. *Sing-Song* uses illustrations as a form of storytelling to speak to a young audience in order to represent an honest and sympathetic interpretation of motherhood.

In *Sing-Song*, religious imagery, specifically the presence of angels, is used to connect the physical and spiritual world. Rossetti does this in order to bring reassurance

to the mother and the child audience on the topic of death and the unknowns that accompany it. I argue that Rossetti represents a mother who finds comfort in the help of angels to look over her child, therefore showing vulnerability on the part of a mother who seeks help from others, rather than presenting a more idealized mother figure who has everything sorted out. This vulnerability contrasts with the maternal expectations of the Victorian era, therefore breaking down stereotypes.

In conclusion, the evidence that I have presented throughout this thesis claims that Christina Rossetti's *Sing-Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book* (1872) transcends the limits of a conventional children's poetry book by addressing the emotional complexities of motherhood. Through Rossetti's poetry and Arthur Hughes' illustrations, *Sing-Song* represents maternal emotions often hidden from the idealized portrayals of motherhood during the Victorian era. My thesis argues that *Sing-Song* is not just a collection of children's nursery rhymes, but rather it is filled with coded messages for the maternal audience, therefore breaking the silence on maternal struggle. My research not only brings a new perspective to *Sing-Song* and Rossetti's intentions with the book, but it also highlights how maternal mental health was being addressed by Rossetti in unconventional ways, such as in a child's nursery rhyme. I maintain that this interpretation of *Sing-Song* will resonate with mothers and contribute to ongoing conversations about the potential challenges related to maternal mental health. It bridges the gap between motherhood in the Victorian era, to motherhood in present day, showing that the hardship is a realistic part of motherhood then and now.

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APPENDIX A

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