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**Possible Lines of Approach**

Rossetti and women

A fascination with women—as the repositories of the mysteries of existence, as embodiments of sensuality, beauty, virtue, semi-divinity—marks Rossetti’s work. He frequently painted his first wife, Elizabeth Siddal, as well as Jane Morris, the wife of his friend, the socialist thinker, designer, and writer William Morris, and these women came to embody the Pre-Raphaelite ideal of female beauty. Rossetti’s fascination with Arthurian romance, Dante’s poetry, and Biblical stories often provided the setting for his depictions of beautiful women, both in painting and in poetry, as well as set the tone for representing femininity and female beauty.

In the poems, as in the paintings, women are simultaneously erotic and stylized, their beauty a source of attraction both physical and spiritual. There is an undeniable sensuality to Rossetti’s women, a sensuality that caused no small amount of controversy and outrage in the Victorian public, but it may be fair to ask whether the women themselves enjoy their sexuality.

One possibility in pursuing this approach is to have students compare and contrast “The Blessed Damozel” and “Jenny”: both poems feature a male speaker, but in “Damozel” he is the deceased woman’s lover, while in “Jenny” he is a scholar observing a sleeping prostitute. What then is suggested here about women and about the ways men view women?

Also of interest here: have students note the connections between the text and the female body, the suggestion that the woman is something to be read, deciphered, interpreted. Do
Rossetti’s women have an inner life? How does it correspond to their physicality? What is the connection between corporeality and spirituality?

Another possibility here is to consider Rossetti’s poems alongside his paintings, to trace the connections and the disparities between the verbal and visual portraits of women. “Soul’s Beauty” and “Body’s Beauty,” two sonnets written to accompany two of Rossetti’s paintings, may be a good place to start.

Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was conceived, in 1848, by Rossetti, at the time a student of Ford Madox Brown, and the painters John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt, both students at the Royal Academy of Arts. Rossetti had seen Hunt’s The Eve of St. Agnes, a painting based on the Keats poem, just as he was becoming increasingly interested in developing connections between poetry and art. The Brotherhood eventually came to have seven members: Rossetti, Millais, and Hunt were joined by Rossetti’s brother William Michael Rossetti, a writer and critic, the sculptor and poet Thomas Woolner, the painter James Collinson, and the art critic Frederick George Stephens.

The Brotherhood took as its founding doctrine four principles: the need for expressing genuine ideas; the attentive study of Nature; the emphasis on direct, serious, heartfelt expression in studying the art of the past and the rejection of convention and routine; and—most importantly—the production of good artworks. The Brotherhood took its name from its members’ rejection of the mechanistic, self-consciously Classical approach of Raphael; preferable to such formulaic elegance was the detailed, vividly intense works of fifteenth-century Italian and Flemish art. The Pre-Raphaelites saw themselves as reformers, as advocates of an unconventional, individual approach to art; some critics accept such a view, labeling the Brotherhood the first avant-garde movement in art, while others dispute claims to reform on the basis of the Pre-Raphaelite interest in realistic and historical representation.

Pre-Raphaelite principles are perhaps most readily seen in Rossetti’s paintings, but the preoccupation with detailed, realistic representation is to be found in his poetry as well. Attention to minute detail and the desire to capture scenes with photographic precision characterize Rossetti’s approach to poetry. So too does the fascination with the medieval, an interest in Arthurian legend and the mysticism of Dante.

Rossetti and Aestheticism

Robert Buchanan may have found Rossetti’s poetry prurient, condemning it as sensuous in “The Fleshy School of Poetry” (see the Broadview Anthology of British Literature section “In Context: The ‘Fleshly School’ Controversy” on the website), as well as too much interested in form and too little in substance, but Rossetti’s stylized depictions of bodies, as well as his appreciation for beauty outside of any didactic or moral purposes, were celebrated by those who subscribed to the doctrine of “art for art’s sake.”
Rossetti is an important predecessor of and influence on the Aesthetic movement in his rejection of moral content and a moralizing purpose in art. His interest in the dying body, in the eroticized and decorated body, and in medieval and classical themes connects him to later aesthetes, writers such as Oscar Wilde and William Butler Yeats. Rossetti also became the subject of an essay by Walter Pater (“Dante Gabriel Rossetti,” *Appreciations* [London: Macmillan & Co., 1889], 228-242), who celebrated Rossetti’s aesthetic taste and judgment, deeming poetic originality the defining quality of Rossetti’s work.

In taking this approach, have students consider the ways in which Rossetti departs from the conventions of Victorian poetry—both stylistically and formally and in terms of subject matter—and the ways in which his work anticipates the poetics of Aestheticism and its emphasis on the pleasures of art as wholly separate from morality and didacticism.

You may want to particularly focus on “Jenny,” a portrait of a prostitute, asking the students to note the poem’s interest in the riddle of the young woman, while remaining unconcerned with the ethical implications of her profession. Also possible: “The Blessed Damozel,” with its positing of a relationship between Christianity and the body, as well as many of the sonnets from *The House of Life*.

**Christina Rossetti**

The Rossetti siblings were all highly literate and creative: William Michael found success as a critic and Maria Francesca Rossetti authored an important study of Dante, *The Shadow of Dante: Being an essay towards studying himself, his world, and his pilgrimage* (1871), but it was Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti who enjoyed (and today enjoy) the most critical and popular success. Indeed, the two were frequent collaborators and significant influences for each other, and it is possible to read a number of Dante Gabriel’s poems alongside his sister’s work.

The most typical pairing is “Jenny” and Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market,” also a poem focused on fallen female sexuality with no interest in explicit condemnation, and one Dante Gabriel Rossetti illustrated. Other possibilities include “My Sister’s Sleep” and “The Blessed Damozel” alongside Christina’s “Remember,” “Song,” “After Death,” and “Dead Before Death,” poems concerned with death and the life beyond.

You may also wish to note that the model in Christina Rossetti’s “In an Artist’s Studio” is Elizabeth Siddal, Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s wife and frequent muse, the subject of many of his paintings; thus, it may be interesting to compare and contrast the depictions of the (same) female model by the Rossettis. Christina Rossetti, too, was frequently painted by her brother, perhaps most notably as the Virgin Mary in *Ecce Ancilla Domini*.
Notes on Approaching Particular Works

“The Blessed Damozel”

Form: Lyric poem of 144 lines in 24 stanzas. Each six-line stanza is rhymed abcbdb.

Background/Approaches: An early version of “The Blessed Damozel” was written in 1847, when Rossetti was only 18 years old; he spent much of the rest of his life revising and reworking the poem, eventually undertaking, in 1871, a pictorial rendering of the poem’s subject. Though there are a number of other poem-painting pairings in Rossetti’s oeuvre, “The Blessed Damozel” is the only instance of the written version preceding the visual. This may be particularly significant given the poem’s interest in perspective, in the possibilities of understanding a situation; you may wish to ask students to consider the painting as another interpretive possibility, another point of view.

“The Blessed Damozel” is perhaps Rossetti’s best-known poem; it certainly furnishes a useful introduction to his work in presenting many of the themes developed in later poems. At the same time, the poem makes use of allusions you may want to explain briefly. Note Rossetti’s debt to Dante’s depiction of Beatrice, the parallels between the position of Beatrice and the damozel. Other influences, identified by Jerome McGann (see the “Introduction to ‘The Blessed Damozel’,” Rossetti Archive, http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/1-1847.s244.raw.html), include Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Raven” (identified as a source by Rossetti, in a letter to his friend Hall Caine) and “To One in Paradise,” the Book of Revelation, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “Poet’s Vow.” These influences may help make sense of the seemingly contradictory connections “The Blessed Damozel” establishes between spirituality and corporeality, the soul and the body, eternal love and eternal anguish and longing. Here you may wish to ask students to consider the relationship the poem posits between the soul and the body. How does the damozel envision (re)union with her beloved? How does he imagine her in heaven?

Ask students to carefully consider the images in the poem’s first stanza. What is to be made of the damozel’s embodiment? How is heaven represented? What might the depiction of a tangible, material heaven have to do with the tangible, corporeal damozel? Does the damozel have a more spiritual significance? What imagery is used to convey her spirituality? How does this imagery set the poem’s tone?

Ask, too, that students consider the implications of the damozel’s longing. What might be suggested by her desire for reunion with her lover, her longing while in heaven? What might the poem be suggesting about spirituality and sensuality, about religion and religious feeling and the demands and desires of the body? How are the connections between Christianity and corporeality posited by the language the damozel uses to express her longing? What is to be made of her address to Christ? How does her language compare to the language of her lover?

Connections: Perhaps the most obvious and the most fitting connection is to be made with Rossetti’s painting of the same name; here is an opportunity to discuss Rossetti as
poet and painter, an artist interested in several mediums. You may find it interesting and ultimately very productive to have students evaluate Rossetti’s treatment of the same material across different media, to compare and contrast the visual and the poetic, the ways these correspond and differ, contribute to and take away from each other.

A number of Christina Rossetti’s poems are likewise preoccupied with life beyond the grave; some possibilities here are “Remember,” “After Death,” and “Song.”

It is possible to read “The Blessed Damozel” alongside Tennyson’s depictions of despairing, isolated women in “The Lady of Shalott” and “Mariana.”

“Jenny”

Form: Lyric poem of 392 lines.

Background/Approaches: Much interest has been generated by the poem’s seeming condoning of the prostitute; certainly it does not condemn her or brand her immoral. “Jenny” is content to simply allow the male speaker to observe the sleeping Jenny, to reflect on the prostitute’s form, to read her body as a kind of text.

Some issues here: Why does Jenny never speak? In what ways is her body important? Is it a sexual body? How so? What is its purpose for the speaker? How might the text reinforce certain stereotypes, the association of men with the mind and the woman with the body? What seems to be the mystery of Jenny, the riddle the speaker attempts to solve? Does he find an answer? What is the possible connection between a “living woman’s simple face” (232) and “men’s souls” (238)?

Connections: “Jenny” is frequently read alongside Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market,” a poem similarly concerned with exploring female sexuality without condemnation; it is also frequently paired with William Morris’s “The Defence of Guenevere,” a poem that, as its title suggests, mounts a defense of the Arthurian queen’s unabashed sexuality.

It may be interesting to pair “Jenny” with Tennyson’s “Lady of Shalott,” particularly in a discussion of female experience depicted through male subjectivity. Another possibility is Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover,” a far more sinister exploration of (female) sexuality.

“My Sister’s Sleep”

Form: 60-line poem in 15 stanzas of four lines each. Each stanza is rhymed abba. As it is used in “My Sister's Sleep,” the quatrain of four-stress iambics was, at the time of the poem's publication, considered old-fashioned, associated with Ben Jonson and Sir Philip Sydney; several months later, the publication of Tennyson's In Memoriam A.H.H., which makes use of the same rhyme-scheme and meter, popularized the form.

Background/Approaches: Particularly if you have discussed Dante Gabriel Rossetti alongside his sister Christina’s work, you may want to make sure to distinguish the
fictional sister of the poem from the actual Christina Rossetti; at the same time, the closeness of the siblings may be of interest in helping students appreciate the intensity of the brother’s emotions in the poem.

Jerome McGann identifies “My Sister’s Sleep” as a particularly useful poem in illustrating the application of Pre-Raphaelite technique to a contemporary subject, noting the poem’s “hyper-realistic treatment of circumstantial detail” (see http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/3-1847.raw.html); the poem’s original appearance in the inaugural issue of The Germ signals its representative status as an early embodiment of Pre-Raphaelite ideas and ideals. In the poem, Rossetti strove after simplicity, attempting to avoid artifice and unnatural effects; ask students how successful he is in doing so.

Other issues that may be of interest: Rossetti’s use of imagery, particularly as a means of emotional expression—ask students to trace the relation of the images the poem relies on to the emotions and sensations it represents. Similarly, consider the use of sound in the poem, the descriptions of things to be heard by the deathbed.

Finally, have students discuss the form of the poem. The stanza Rossetti uses here has come to be known as the “In Memoriam stanza,” a reference to Tennyson’s use of the same rhyme-and-meter scheme in his In Memoriam, though Rossetti’s poem in fact predates the publication of Tennyson’s. What about the form seems conducive to poems of grief and mourning?

**Connections:** In Memoriam furnishes a logical counterpart; besides parallel formal qualities, Rossetti and Tennyson's poems are concerned with mourning, with death that has come too soon, with the intense reactions the death of a loved one provokes.

“Nuptial Sleep”

**Form:** Sonnet (with an abbaabacc cdcddc rhyme scheme).

**Background/Approaches:** The poem first appeared in Poems of 1870; it became the basis of Buchanan’s attack on “the fleshly school of poetry,” where it was singled out as particularly “shameless.” Though Rossetti defended the poem against charges of impropriety, he chose not to include it in the “House of Life” sonnet sequence in Ballads and Sonnets in 1881, having apparently decided it made use of “an unpleasant excess of realism of a kind not suitable for an indiscriminate audience” (see William Sharp, Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Record and a Study [London: Macmillan, 1882]). Because students are unlikely to see “Nuptial Sleep” as controversial or shameless or depraved, it may be particularly useful here to consider Victorian mores and the official Victorian discourse about sex, even in the context of marriage, as it is in Rossetti’s poem.

How do students understand Rossetti’s depiction of the married couple, having made love, falling asleep? What possibilities does the poem envision for the lovers? How does
it seem to define love? What connection does sex have to love here? That is, insofar as the poem focuses on the fleshly, to what end does it do so?

**Connections:** It is certainly interesting and productive to read “Nuptial Sleep” in the context of the other sonnets which make up the “House of Life” sequence. Have students compare and contrast the poems, consider the variety of experiences depicted in the sequence, and chart the movement from transcendence to gloom. What might the sequence as a whole suggest about the possibilities of love?

**Questions for Discussion**

1. Discuss Rossetti’s depictions of female bodies. How might you compare his paintings of women to his poetic descriptions?

2. How does Rossetti make use of body language, of descriptions of bodily positioning, to convey a character’s emotions? What connection does he posit between the body and emotional life?

3. Discuss Rossetti’s use of the visual, his reliance on description and on the sense of sight.

4. How does Rossetti make use of spoken speech? What do the mother’s and brother’s words, for example, add to “My Sister’s Sleep”?

5. Discuss Rossetti’s poetry in the context of Robert Buchanan’s “The Fleshly School of Poetry.” To what extent is Rossetti’s poetry “naughty” and “shameless”? That is, how does Rossetti’s work defy Victorian conventions? How can his sensuality be understood in the context of Victorian mores? Of other Victorian poetry?

6. What is the significance of death in Rossetti’s poetry?

7. Discuss Rossetti as an influence on Aestheticism. What qualities in Rossetti’s work can be labeled “aesthetic”? Can his poetry be said to be “decadent”?

8. Discuss “The Blessed Damozel” in the context of Rossetti’s painting of the same name.

**Critical Viewpoints /Reception History**

Dante Gabriel Rossetti started out as a painter, coming to poetry intermittently throughout his life. He produced only two major collections of poetry—*Poems*, published in 1870, after Rossetti was persuaded to disinter the manuscript he had buried alongside his wife Elizabeth Siddal, and *Ballads and Sonnets*, published in 1881. But Rossetti’s limited output understates the wide-ranging influence of his poetry.
Rossetti’s impact—both as painter and author—is closely bound up with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, founded by Rossetti, William Holman Hunt, and John Everett Millais in 1848 as a group devoted to a return to the ideals and techniques in art dating to fifteenth-century Italian and Flemish art, to a celebration of genuine, unmannered expression in the arts. The Brotherhood first exhibited paintings in early 1849, with works by Hunt and Millais exhibited at the Royal Academy and Rossetti’s *Girlhood of Mary Virgin* appearing in the Free Exhibition on Hyde Park Corner; Rossetti included two sonnets he wrote explaining the painting on its frame, making clear his interest in the intersection of the visual and the poetic.

The early reception of these works was encouraging, and the Brotherhood soon embarked on producing a journal, both as a forum for articulating and debating ideas and as a means for spreading these ideas to a wider audience. The resulting publication—*The Germ: Thoughts towards Nature in Poetry, Literature, and Art*—appeared between January and April of 1850, publishing two of Rossetti’s best-known poems, “The Blessed Damozel” and “My Sister’s Sleep,” but the magazine was apparently not successful enough to warrant continued publication after the first four issues. At the same time, the Brotherhood generated controversy and hostile reviews; in the most prominent and most notorious episode, the 1850 exhibition of Millais’s *Christ in the House of His Parents* was deemed blasphemous, pronounced backward and absurd by other outraged reviewers, most notably Charles Dickens in *Household Words*. Still, the Brotherhood was defended and championed by no less a Victorian authority than John Ruskin, who, for a time, became a close friend and mentor of Rossetti’s, and Rossetti devoted himself to painting, largely to the exclusion of writing, throughout the 1850s. The single-minded devotion appears to have paid off: by 1856, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood had established itself as a cultural force, and Rossetti in particular came to be seen as an important authority in the realm of the arts.

Having defined himself as an artist, Rossetti turned to writing, apparently making elaborate publishing plans. In 1861, he published *The Early Italian Poets*, a volume containing his translations of Italian poetry, including Dante’s *La Vita Nuova*; the collection was well received, and Rossetti intended to publish a companion work of original poetry, to be entitled *Dante at Verona and Other Poems*. This plan was undone by the 1862 death of Rossetti’s wife, Elizabeth Siddal, who took an overdose of laudanum following the stillborn birth of their child. In perhaps the most notorious act of poetic grief, Rossetti buried the manuscript volume in Elizabeth’s coffin. The burial of the actual manuscript signaled the more symbolic burial of Rossetti’s poetic ambitions, as he once again turned away from writing, dedicating his creative energies to painting for the next several years.

In 1866 and 1867, Rossetti produced two sonnets as companion pieces for his paintings. The two poems—“Soul’s Beauty” and “Body’s Beauty”—were published alongside another sonnet, “Venus Verticordia,” in 1868. These poems are particularly notable for inspiring Rossetti’s return to writing, his renewed commitment to the importance of poetry; eye problems and a growing fear of blindness also likely contributed to Rossetti’s turn to poetry.
In 1869, Rossetti had the manuscript that had been buried with his wife exhumed from her coffin, setting himself to the revision of the poems as well as the composition of additional materials, publishing *Poems* in 1871. The collection was a tremendous success, generating a great deal of popular and critical attention. William Morris concluded his review in *Academy* (14 May 1871) thusly:

I think these lyrics, with all their other merits, the most complete of their time; no difficulty is avoided in them: no subject is treated vaguely, languidly, or heartlessly: as there is no commonplace or second-hand thought left in them to be atoned for by beauty of execution, so no thought is allowed to overshadow that beauty of art which compels a real poet to speak in verse and not in prose. Nor do I know what lyrics of any time are to be called great if we are to deny that title to these.

But not every critic was a fan, as evidenced by Robert Buchanan’s assessment, appearing under the pseudonym Thomas Maitland in the October 1871 issue of the *Contemporary Review*. In “The Fleshly School of Poetry—Mr. D.G. Rossetti,” Buchanan accused Rossetti’s poetry of immorality, of obscenity, of indecency. Judging Rossetti’s paintings to have been conceived “unpleasantly” and drawn “ill,” Buchanan remarks of the poetry:

There is the same thinness and transparence of design, the same combination of the simple and the grotesque, the same morbid deviation from healthy forms of life, the same sense of weary, wasting, yet exquisite sensuality; nothing virile, nothing tender, nothing completely sane; a superfluity of extreme sensibility, of delight in beautiful forms, hues, and tints, and a deep-seated indifference to all agitating forces and agencies, all tumultuous griefs and sorrows, all the thunderous stress of life, and all the straining storm of speculation…. The mind of Mr. Rossetti is like a glassy mere, broken only by the dive of some water-bird or the hum of winged insects, and brooded over by an atmosphere of insufferable closeness, with a light blue sky above it, sultry depths mirrored within it, and a surface so thickly sown with water-lilies that it retains its glassy smoothness even in the strongest wind.

Citing Morris’s positive review alongside a rapturous review by Swinburne, Buchanan wonders that no critic has commented on “Mr. Rossetti[‘s] … naughtiness.” Rossetti responded to Buchanan’s attack in “The Stealthy School of Criticism,” denying that his poetry was “fleshy” or thematically lacking and attacking the critic writing under the pseudonym (hence, Rossetti’s title). Buchanan, in turn, republished an expanded version of his criticism, now under his own name and more generally directed against sensualism in poetry; he eventually retracted his attack.

The “Fleshly School” controversy notwithstanding, Rossetti was undeniably popular during this stage of his career. But by this time, he had succumbed to depression and chloral addiction; he died in 1882, not long after the 1881 publication of his second poetry collection, *Ballads and Sonnets*. 
The period immediately following Rossetti’s death saw him at the height of his reputation. Walter Pater wrote an “appreciation” of his work (first published in Thomas Humphry Ward’s *The English Poets* [New York: The Macmillan Company, 1883], and then included in Pater’s *Appreciations, with an essay on Style*), and he was a clear and undeniable influence on the aesthetes. But the first half of the twentieth century proved less kind; Rossetti’s work seemed ill-suited to the rigors of modernism and the New Criticism, and he fell out of academic favor, with only the most occasional of interests given to his personal life and, even more rarely, his paintings.

The interest in the biographical details—often quite lurid, as in the episode of the poems exhumed from the grave of his wife or in the purported affair with Jane Morris—dominated Rossetti studies for some time, even as scholarly interest renewed in the second half of the century. Using biographical information, scholars have since been able to offer a sense of Rossetti as a poet-painter, an intensively creative man of word and art, though ultimately he is seen as more influential for other writers than important in his own right. Robert Johnston’s *Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (New York: Twayne, 1969) and David G. Riede’s *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Limits of Victorian Vision* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983) are two useful examples of approaches combining biography with insights into Rossetti’s work, concluding finally that Rossetti failed to commit to the pursuit of objectivity in his work. Other critics argue for Rossetti’s significance, locating him within a poetic context and tradition; you may find Florence Saunders Boos’s *The Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Critical Reading and Source Study* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), Robert M. Cooper’s *Lost on Both Sides: Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Critic and Poet* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1970), Ronnalie Rooper Howard’s *The Dark Glass: Vision and Technique in the Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1972), and Joseph F. Vogel’s *Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Versecraft* (Gainesville: U of Florida P, 1971) particularly relevant in tracing the resurgence of the study of Rossetti as a serious poet.

Though much of the criticism outlined above is some 30 years old, it largely suggests the state of Rossetti studies today. There remains skepticism about Rossetti’s significance, a tendency to view him as simply a part of a larger movement or an inspirational and influential figure. Still, Rossetti’s work, painting and poetry alike, continues to warrant attention, to garner interest; no longer shocking in its sensuousness, its fleshiness, it is now simply beautiful, simply art.

**Other Works of Interest**


**Links**

A bibliography of resources, including criticism and web sites, can be found at [http://www.literaryhistory.com/19thC/ROSSETTIDG.htm](http://www.literaryhistory.com/19thC/ROSSETTIDG.htm).


The Rossetti page on the Victorian Web can be found here: [http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dgr/index.html](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dgr/index.html)

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