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The Poetry of Christina Rossetti and Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Same Femme, Different Fate

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Abstract

Siblings Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Christina Rossetti both lived during the Victorian era and wrote poetry which epitomizes the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Although they were related, these two poets were drastically different, and their differences are evident in their poetry. Dante Gabriel was infatuated with beautiful women and many of his poems express sexual desire, while Christina was intensely devoted to God and many of her poems provide moral instruction. However, these poets both make femme fatales the subjects of their poems “Body’s Beauty,” “The Card-Dealer,” “The World,” and “Babylon the Great.” This paper analyzes the different ways in which Dante Gabriel Rossetti uses the image of a dangerous, eroticized woman to symbolize the threat that the power of female beauty poses to a man's life, while Christina Rossetti uses this image to symbolize the threat that worldly desires pose to a person's eternal life.

Keywords

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina Rossetti, femme fatale, Pre-Raphaelite, poetry

Disciplines

English Language and Literature | Literature in English, British Isles

Comments

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ENG 333

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13 December 2017

The Poetry of Christina Rossetti and Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Same *Femme*, Different Fate

Although Victorian poets Christina Rossetti and Dante Gabriel Rossetti were siblings, they chose very different subjects for their poems and had very different reasons for writing. Christina's mother raised her to be a faithful Christian, and Christina's poetry demonstrates that she was intensely devoted to God and instructing others how to avoid temptation. On the other hand, Dante Gabriel Rossetti was not only infatuated with painting or writing about beautiful women but also with pursuing them, and many of his poems express sexual desire. Despite these poets' very different lives, they both make femme fatales the subjects of their poems "Body's Beauty," "The Card-Dealer," "The World," and "Babylon the Great." Although both poets portray a dangerous, eroticized female in these poems, Dante Gabriel Rossetti uses the femme fatale motif in "Body's Beauty" and "The Card-Dealer," to demonstrate that the allure and power of female beauty threatens one's earthly life, while Christina Rossetti uses the femme fatale motif in "The World" and "Babylon the Great" to warn that desires of the world are deceitful and pursuing them threatens one's eternal life.

The meaning of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's use of the femme fatale motif only becomes clear when one understands his infatuation with beauty, especially female beauty. Beautiful females are central to nearly all of his paintings, especially in his more mature works (Bullen 9). J. B. Bullen, an English Literature and Art History professor, explains that "the driving force of [Dante's] imaginative experience was erotic desire and the part that desire played in life, where

the women of his paintings and poetry were the means through which he expressed desire” (9). Bullen makes a significant connection between the women in Dante Gabriel’s art and Dante Gabriel’s erotic desire, not only in his paintings but also in his poetry. As a heterosexual male, Dante Gabriel did not focus on women merely for aesthetic purposes but also because he physically desired women. Elizabeth Siddal, who became one of Dante Gabriel’s main muses, is an example of how Dante Gabriel’s personal desires influenced his art. Initially, Siddal’s “withdrawn but intelligent personality provided a perfect ‘screen’ for his erotic and aesthetic projections,” but their relationship extended beyond a professional relationship as Siddal began to live in Dante Gabriel’s home (Bullen 54). Rossetti’s infatuation with women clearly stems from his own erotic desires, but his poems reveal that he viewed women’s alluring beauty as the cause for desire.

Both “The Card-Dealer” and “Body’s Beauty” convey the allure of female beauty through the riches and eroticism associated with each poem’s femme fatale. “The Card-Dealer” portrays a woman who embodies the femme fatale motif. Dante Gabriel reveals that the female card-dealer is beautiful within the first lines because the speaker asks, “could you not drink her gaze like wine?” and goes on to talk about her gaze’s “splendour” (1-2). He indicates that her eyes are strikingly beautiful, adding that they “unravel the coiled night / and know the stars at noon” (5-6). Dante Gabriel does not directly describe the allure of this female’s body, but he expresses her allure by connecting her with several images of riches. For example, the speaker explains that the card-dealer plays “with all men” and says that one of those men “lov’st [*sic*] those gems upon her hand” which shine “blood-red and purple, green and blue” from her rings (23-26). Dante Gabriel also describes a “rich prize” of gold “heaped beside her hand,” introducing the word gold as representative of wealth (7-8). Then, he connects the card-dealer

with this image even more obviously by writing that “he were rich who should unwind” her “woven golden hair” (11-12). The gold of the card-dealer’s hair is significant because of its erotic connotations. According to D. M. R. Bentley, gold has “erotic, visceral associations” which Dante Gabriel draws from in this poem (Bentley 6). Additionally, Dante Gabriel “lived in a period that fetishized female hair,” and he was particularly fascinated by it (Bullen 184). Art critic Elizabeth Gitter even argues that “the more abundant the hair [in Dante Gabriel’s paintings], the more potent the sexual invitation implied by its display” (Gitter 938). Dante Gabriel therefore demonstrates the card-dealer’s intense attractive power by bringing his own erotic fascination with hair into his description of her.

Dante Gabriel includes these same erotic associations in his description of the femme fatale in his poem, “Body’s Beauty.” The female subject of this poem is “Adam’s first wife, Lilith, ...the witch he loved before the gift of Eve” (1-2). As he describes this female’s allure to Adam and other men, Dante Gabriel stresses that Lilith’s power mainly comes from her “enchanted hair” which “was the first gold” (1). Her hair is as valuable as real gold, or even more so because her hair is the first gold to appear on the earth. Both levels of value imply that Lilith’s hair is alluring. “Body’s Beauty” was written to accompany Dante Gabriel’s painting, *Lady Lilith*, in which he portrayed a “Modern Lilith” combing out her long, golden locks. In fact, Lilith’s hair is the center of the painting and takes up a sizeable portion of the canvas. Based on Elizabeth Gitter’s study of hair in Victorian paintings, the prominence of Lilith’s hair in this painting and the accompanying sonnet reveal the highly eroticized nature of Dante Gabriel’s portrayal of this femme fatale. Clearly, Dante Gabriel reveals that a dangerous aspect of Lilith, like the card-dealer, is her ability to arouse the desire of men.

In order to show that the abilities of Lilith to arouse desire can negatively impact men and even be fatal, Dante Gabriel uses a theme of deadly entrapment in “Body’s Beauty.” Virginia Allen says in her article on *Lady Lilith* and the accompanying sonnet that although “Rossetti seems never to have used the phrase ‘femme fatale,’ he clearly intended that meaning in his combination of painting and poem” (Allen 286). Allen supports her claim that Dante Gabriel aimed to portray this type of seductress by quoting Dante Gabriel’s explanation of the “picture-sonnet” to a friend. In his letter, Dante Gabriel indicates that “the perilous principle in the world being female from the first...is about the most essential meaning of the sonnet” (qtd. in Allen 286). Dante Gabriel therefore reveals that he views the attractive nature of female sexuality as inherently dangerous. In “Body’s Beauty,” he suggests that Lilith’s danger is fatal because of the power of her hair. He writes that she “draws men to watch the bright web she can weave / Till heart and body and life are in its hold” (7). The previous lines describe Lilith’s hair, which implies Lilith weaves the “web” mentioned in this line with her hair and sexual allure. Significantly, the web ensnares “heart *and* body *and* life” (emphasis added) (8). An ensnared heart is metaphoric for falling in love, but a trapped body and life have fatal implications. The last line of “Body’s Beauty” reiterates this theme because it describes a youth that has been attracted by Lilith and now has “round his heart one strangling golden hair” (14). This young man has been ensnared by the same hair that aroused his desire. Now Lilith’s hair is strangling his heart, which suggests a deadly end for the youth.

In the same way that he uses the theme of entrapment in “Body’s Beauty,” Dante Gabriel builds a theme of death in “The Card-Dealer” in order to point out the deadly danger of female beauty. Not surprisingly, many scholars have recognized the character of the card-dealer as “a ‘female death symbol’” (Bentley 3). Dante Gabriel draws his readers in as he describes the card

game, and then reveals that the card-dealer is metaphorically playing the game of life with the men and dealing out death (51-54). He plainly reveals the game's deadly focus in the final stanza, but the theme of death permeates the poem. For example, the speaker describes playing the game in "a land of darkness as darkness itself / And of the shadow of death" (35-36). Dante Gabriel connects this theme of death with the seductive nature of the card-dealer as he lists the suits of playing cards and cleverly gives each one a double meaning. He begins with "the heart, that doth but crave / More, having fed," which indicates lust, and ends with "the spade, to dig a grave," which indicates that the game will be fatal for those who lust after the femme fatale (37-42). This card-dealer may be beautiful, but Dante Gabriel shows through her that the attraction of female beauty can be a deadly danger.

While Dante Gabriel Rossetti's warnings about the dangers of female beauty stem from his own erotic desires, Christina Rossetti has a completely different outlook on love, which influences the way she chooses to portray female beauty in her poetry. In Christina's love poetry she emphasizes the brevity of love between humans, "and thereby affirms that the subject must look to other, divine forms of love to find a more hospitable place for the heart" (Waldman 17). Not only is Christina not passionately desirous of the opposite sex like her brother is, she utterly prefers God's love to human love. Although scholars have debated the effect of Christina's devotional poetry, they have never doubted that Christina writes devotional poetry because of her faithful desire for God. (D'Amico 16). Therefore, the image of the femme fatale in Christina's poetry does not present commentary on human attraction and desire, but instead provides devotional instruction for how to love God best.

Through her use of the femme fatale motif in her poems "The World," and "Babylon the Great," Christina instructs her readers to avoid the temptations of worldly desires. In "The

World,” the seductive female subject clearly represents the world not only because of the poem’s title but also because of the erotic language Christina uses to describe worldly desires. Dante Gabriel uses erotic language to signify desire, and so does Christina. The speaker describes being wooed by the world with offers of “ripe fruits, sweet flowers, and full satiety” (5-6). Ripe fruits have a sexual connotation, according to the authors of *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (Silver and Beer 149). Therefore, when the world promises to fully satisfy the speaker with its fruits and flowers, Christina’s eroticism is apparent. She uses this eroticism to emphasize that the temptations of the world are intensely alluring.

“Babylon the Great” is implicitly erotic due to its biblical connection, and—like “The World”—this poem’s eroticism conveys that Christina uses the femme fatale represents worldliness. The title of this poem comes from Revelation 17 which describes “the great whore...with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth have been made drunk with the wine of her fornication,” who is labeled “Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and Abominations of the Earth” (*King James Version*, Rev. 17:1-5). If the “she” and femme fatale of this poem is Babylon the Great, then she is inherently linked with sexual immorality. However, Christina does not include this erotic imagery in order to condemn female sexuality as a temptation to sexual immorality. Instead, according to Diane D’Amico, Christina reads the whore of Babylon as she reads other “harlot figures” such as Eve: “as emblems of female disobedience, of diverting mind from God” (D’Amico 128). D’Amico’s explanation of disobedience as a diversion of one’s mind from God profoundly captures the point that Christina seeks to convey in “Babylon the Great.” Christina dresses this whore in a “scarlet vest and gold and gem and pearl”—examples of tempting riches—in order to clearly associate her with the temptations of the world. The fact that Christina makes the whore of Babylon this

femme fatale's persona illustrates that pursuing worldly desires diverts one's mind from properly loving God.

By demonstrating the deceitfulness of the femme fatale's beauty in both of her poems, Christina shows that the promises of the world are deceitful. In "The World," Christina juxtaposes two versions of her female presentation of the world. One version is fair and woos the speaker during the day, while the second reveals the world's deceit because she changes at night and becomes "loathsome and foul with hideous leprosy" (1-3). Christina emphasizes that the contrast between these two images is based on deception by adding that "by day she stands a lie: by night she stands / In all the naked horror of the truth" (9-10). At night, the lies of the world are revealed, and the speaker sees the true horrible form of the femme fatale. Christina makes this powerful contrast between female beauty and ugliness because it exemplifies how attractive worldly desires can be while also showing that the promises of worldly desires are false. They distract from Christina's objective truth: the existence of God and the trustworthiness of his promises.

Christina's portrayal of the whore of Babylon in "Babylon the Great" also shows that worldly desires are attractive but ultimately false. The speaker quickly establishes that Babylon the Great is "foul," "ill-favoured," and "set askew" (1). Then, she warns her audience to "gaze not upon [the whore] till thou dream her fair" (2). In this way, Christina suggests that gazing longingly at this femme fatale for too long is risky because one will begin to believe the lie that she is beautiful. Christina repeats the words "gaze not" at the beginning of two other lines of "Babylon the Great" to emphasize the danger that she poses. She even adds that this whore's "dancing whirl / Turns giddy the fixed gazer presently" (9-10). She wants to demonstrate the negative impact that pursuing worldly desires has on anyone who pursues them. Stephanie

Johnson argues that Rossetti's representation of Babylon the Great "implies the dangerous vulnerability of women's sexuality, corrupt at its heart and powerful in its corrupting of the male" (Johnson 115). However, Johnson's interpretation misreads Christina's poem because she concludes her article by claiming that "renouncing the limitation of physical pleasure, [Christina] does not renounce the body; instead, she asks readers to love the world and the worldly, setting... our souls aright" (122-123). Christina's representation of Babylon the Great uses imagery of the powerfully seductive nature of female beauty because the way that men are seduced by it serves her point. Her point is not to imply the danger of female sexuality but to imply the danger of loving the world and the worldly.

As Christina emphasizes the danger posed by pursuing worldly desires, she is not only concerned about how this pursuit will be detrimental to one's current relationship with God, but also with how this pursuit is a threat to one's eternal life with God. D'Amico maintains that "looking beyond time to eternity" is "characteristic of [Christina's] poetry," and both "Babylon the Great" and "The World" support this notion (D'Amico 137). In both poems, Christina uses imagery of hell in order to illuminate the threat that worldly desires are to one's eternal life. In "Babylon the Great," Christina openly declares that the whore of Babylon's fate will be that "she amid her pomp are set on fire" (14). Although Revelation 17 discusses the whore being burned with fire, Christina provides a simpler explanation of her fate which suggests that she will be cast into the fires of hell (*King James Version*, Rev. 17). Therefore, anyone who turns giddy from gazing upon her and the worldly desires she represents risks being cast into hell with her if they desire the world instead of God.

Finally, Christina uses imagery of hell and references the soul in order to make the same point in her poem, "The World." As the speaker reveals the femme fatale's true ugliness, she

describes the woman's demonic characteristics. This personification of the world has "pushing horns and clawed and clutching hands," and Christina implies that she has cloven feet which are particularly representative of devils (11-14). The final two lines of "The World" form a question which actually mentions hell and shows the speaker's concern for her soul. Although Johnson's argument is ultimately flawed, she makes a significant point that, "by concluding 'The World' with a question, Rossetti leaves the future open, so that the choice to resist the 'void' remains viable for the speaker" (Johnson 117). The speaker, questioning the changeful personification of the world, asks "is this a friend indeed; that I should sell / My soul to her, give her my life and youth, / Till my feet, cloven too, take hold on hell?" (12-14). The speaker shows that she is concerned about her soul and realizes that giving in to worldly desires will involve selling her soul. Christina claims that the cost of selling one's soul is very high. You lose your "life and youth," and receive cloven feet and eternity in hell. Most significantly, gaining hell means that you lose an eternity with God, and this eternal relationship is exactly what Christina desires above anything else and instructs her readers to also desire.

In both Christina's poems and Dante Gabriel's poems, desire is a key aspect of their representations of femme fatales. However, close study of these poets' lives and their poetry reveals that the desires expressed through these femme fatales are radically different. They both present female beauty as dangerously tempting, but Dante Gabriel views this allure as the cause for male sexual desire, while Christina uses her understanding of this allure to warn against desires that separate a person from God. Dante Gabriel's warnings about female beauty are serious, but they are ultimately confined to one's lifetime. Christina, on the other hand, dictates her warnings about worldliness because these desires impact one's eternal life.

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Carolyn Kirsch