2004

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Every Rose has its Thorn:
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in the department of English

Seton Hall University
December 2004
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The Complex Nature of the Female in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s 
Paintings and Poetry

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was notorious for both his artistic and poetic talent throughout his short lifetime, where he was not only influenced by great poets of his time, but became influential to several poets to follow him. Rossetti matured as an artist as he grew as a person, as Cooper notes, “The important points are that from boyhood on, Rossetti’s interests were largely limited to the ‘beautiful and the passionate,’ and that this limitation affected his poetry” (5). The “beautiful” and “passionate” that affected the poet and his works were that of the female subject, which he struggled with in his works and his life. Rossetti succumbed to the female character for the fact that he was unable to contain her to one popular persona of his time: the archetypal virgin. Johnston noted the female’s double role apart from this innocent virgin, “Woman as the embodiment of love for Rossetti doubtlessly was seen in her inevitable double role. Dante Gabriel might project into her significance the hopeful promise of heaven, but awesomely she could change into the grotesque figure of ‘The Orchard Pit’” (120). The latter of these two female personas was the successor, where the femme fatale triumphed over stereotypical roles that a predominately male society forced upon her. Nonetheless, the female lashed back at her most
noteworthy victim, the creator of these prevailing beasts within the beauties, Dante Gabriel himself.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was born on May 12, 1828 in London, and became one of the world's most remarkable poets and artists of the Victorian Era. He was born as Gabriel Charles Dante Rossetti by his mother, Frances Polidori, the sister of Byron's physician John William Polidori. Rossetti's father, Gabriel Rossetti, who had a poetic background that was influenced by the poet Dante, gave his first born son the same name in honor of a poet that so enamored him. Rossetti decided to reverse his birth name to Dante Gabriel to give praise to the notorious poet he was named after, and thus he mirrored his earlier poetry after Dante.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was one of four children who graced the already talented Rossetti family. Although his older sister, Maria, moved on to become an Anglican nun, Rossetti and his two other siblings all shared an interest in the world of poetics and art at a very early age. Rossetti's writings and drawings at this early age became the foundation for what motivated his successful career as a poet and artist. His sister, Christina, became a successful Victorian poet alongside her brother; however, Dante Gabriel's use of art in conjunction with his beautiful sonnets became the cause of his notoriety as a successful composer of art and rhetoric, where he stressed how important the two forms of art were in portraying their shared meanings.

Rossetti's equal love for painting and poetry motivated him to study both of these talents at The School of the Royal Academy; however, he lacked formal
learning and was solely focused on his main interest in reading the poetry of John Keats and William Blake, as well as translating works by Dante and Dante’s contemporaries. Johnston notes Dante’s influence on Rossetti's works at an early age, “Rossetti was twenty when he completed the translation of Vita Nuova, a superb achievement that, as others have attested, speaks of the power the original held over the young man who was not to meet his Beatrice until 1850. If Dante’s Paradise appeared at all in Rossetti’s expression, it did so in his early pictures as The Girhood of Mary Virgin” (22).

“The Blessed Damozel” and The Girhood of the Mary Virgin, mirrored much of the religious ideas and inspiration from Rossetti’s predecessors, Dante and the Romantic Keats. Rossetti’s, "The Blessed Damozel," had religious imagery present throughout the entire poem with many references to Heaven and an angelic female. The inspiration of the blessed damozel came from his first influence, Dante; however, as time passed he also developed an imagination like that of Keats, “The poem is Dantesque, colored through by the romantic medievalism that Rossetti loved and lived in his imagination, the world he found and to which he responded in such favorite poems as Keats” (Johnston 25). The blessed damozel was to Rossetti as Beatrice was to Dante as the faithful lover who will die for love, “she embodies Rossetti’s ideal of the single mindedly passionate person (almost invariably female) who will die for love” (Boos 165).

The poem contains religious imagery in the very first stanza, “The blessed damozel leaned out / From the gold bar of Heaven; / Her eyes were deeper than the depth / Of waters stilled at even; / She had three lilies in her hand, / And the
stars in her hair were seven" (1-6). Here, the female portrayed the virtuous appearance like Dante’s Beatrice, which was a strong belief for the time period; however, through the illustration of a passive and innocent woman disguised the destructive nature of a warrior woman beneath her false sheath.

Johnston recognized the “virgin” similar to Dante’s Beatrice in Rossetti’s works, “Strangely enough, the majority of the religious poems of Rossetti’s early years deal with a fairly orthodox view of the Virgin” (59). The obvious religious symbolism in the poem, ‘The Blessed Damozel’ became too cliché, and the hidden strengths of the female surfaced with the malicious symbolism. The seven stars in her hair would normally represent her virtues, but instead were an allusion to the seven deadly sins of man, the most significant in this case being lust. The damozel was the force that directed the male to his demise masked by a chaste persona capable of luring the man with an intense sexuality from within her fragile frame. This was also true with references to the chaste Mary in the poem, “We two, ’she said, ’will seek the groves / Where the lady Mary is, / With her five handmaidens, whose names / Are five sweet symphonies” (103-106). Instead of Mary being the chaste female, the religious character she portrayed masked the temptress that she really was. The handmaidens who are five sweet symphonies were seen as the five beautiful features of a female; her plentiful golden or dark hair, plump lips, bare necks, her voluptuous figure, and most importantly the sexual aura she projects. These “five sweet symphonies” were how she swayed the naïve men with her passionate song of beauty.
The malice of Mary and her handmaids was relevant as the poem progresses, "Circling sit they, with bound locks / And foreheads garlanded; / Into the fine cloth white like flame / Weaving the golden thread, / To fashion the birth-robés for them / Who are just born, being dead" (109-114). Their bound locks were similar to the golden locks of the femme fatale, along with the cloth that contained the pureness of white, but when compared to the whiteness of a flame there was a significant danger within the devious beauty. The circle that they formed bound together with their locks, and further noted the idea of the female closing in on her prey, the male who was in the center of whirlwind he could not resist. The imagery here signified angelic maidens whose passionate flame enthralled males and predicted their fate of death.

During the time Rossetti was involved in composing one of his first and most famous poems, "The Blessed Damozel," he began to consort with other men who shared the same interest in painting and poetry. One man who had influenced Rossetti greatly was the painter Ford Madox Brown, who took Rossetti under his wing as a pupil, and ultimately became both a friend and mentor. During the short time under Brown's direction, Rossetti had seen a fellow peer's painting, The Eve of St. Agnes, based on John Keats' poem, and finally caught up with this old acquaintance. Rossetti took residence in his colleague Hunt's studio, and began painting his first major oil painting, The Girlhood of the Mary Virgin.

The artistic values that Rossetti and Hunt shared were predisposed by the Nazarenes, a group of contemporary German painters, but most importantly
became the foundation of discussion for the group that became known as the
Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The brotherhood’s primary goal was to rescue
contemporary art and portray what they called “truth to Nature,” as Cooper notes:

Their primary purpose, “left unsaid by reason of its fundamental
necessity,” Hunt wrote years later, “was to make Art a handmaid in
the cause of justice and truth.” (31)

Rossetti’s first debuted oil painting signed with the inscription “PRB” was that of
The Girlhood of Mary Virgin, in a London gallery in March of 1849, almost a year
after the founding of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. This painting illustrated
strong religious symbolism of the “blessed virgin” that Rossetti so longed to be
depicted.

The corresponding sonnet, Mary’s Girlhood, depicted this chaste woman
portrayed in the picture. The sonnet illustrated the blessed Mary as being
“faithful and hopeful” to God and for God, as the last two stanzas reiterated the
virtues in the portrait:

These are the symbols. On that cloth of red
I’ the centre is the Tripoint: perfect each,
Except the second of its points, to teach
That Christ is not yet born. The books - whose head
Is golden Charity, as Paul hath said –
Those virtues are wherein the soul is rich:
Therefore on them the lily standeth, which

Is Innocence, being interpreted,
The seven-thorn’d briar and the palm seven-leaved
Are her great sorrow and her great reward.
Until the end be full, the Holy One
Abides without. She soon shall have achieved
Her perfect purity: yea, God the Lord
Shall soon vouchsafe His Son to be her Son.
(Stanza II 1-14)
The ideas here portrayed not only religious notions of the Virgin Mary and the Immaculate Conception, but most importantly illustrated the domestic role of women in Victorian society. The introduction to The Norton Anthology noted:

The king's relegation of women to the hearth and heart reflects an ideology that claimed that woman had a special nature peculiarly fit for her domestic role. Most aptly epitomized by the title of Coventry Patmore's immensely popular poem The Angel in the House, this concept of womanhood stressed woman's purity and selflessness. Protected and enshrined within the home, her role was to create a place of peace where man could take refuge from the difficulties of modern life. (1057)

Not only is the "virgin" woman in the painting and the sonnet portrayed as a woman of purity and selflessness, but as a captive who was "enshrined" within the painting and sonnet. This idea of suppressing the woman was relevant because if escaped she would have been able to surpass the male, and from Rossetti's other paintings the notion of the male isolating the female in art was imperative.

This religious idea of the virgin woman or woman in general soon became the polar opposite of what Rossetti's paintings and works represented. As Cooper noted, "Religion per se had almost as little appeal as a subject. When he was twenty, he was preparing his painting, 'The Girlhood of Mary Virgin,' for the 1849 Exhibition. But the motive seems at best to have been momentary, if not monetary" (185). The apparent causes for this shift from religious to sensual
works was due to the unexpected suicide of his wife Elizabeth, his trysts with Fanny Cornforth and Jane Morris, or perhaps because of the strong Victorian ideals that forced the sheltered woman to surpass and dominate her male suppressors.

With his art and poetry, Rossetti was able to bring to life the beautiful images that could only be envisioned in the dreams of Victorian society; a society which had a dark and dismal landscape that excluded any form of imagination. The Norton Anthology acknowledges Rossetti’s combined talent stating, “In both the early and late phases of his writing and painting, however, it can be said that he remained a poet in his painting and a painter in his poetry” (1574). Many beautiful images were portrayed throughout his famous poems and portraits, but the most remarkable figures that were subject to his poetry and art were his fascination and portrayal of the female creature and her sensuality. These beings were an eternal subject that so dominated Rossetti’s life and career, and forced him to devote the majority of his livelihood in attempt to confine these female figures in his poetry and art.

Rossetti’s blessed virgin present in his poems and paintings was a reflection of Dante’s Beatrice; however, a new muse influenced his works. Not just a fabricated character from a favorite poet, but the women in Rossetti’s life greatly dominated his collection of poems and paintings. Rossetti’s “live specimens” became an obsession in his art, as well as his life. Although the women subject to the poet’s works were portrayed to be weak and vulnerable, Rossetti also illustrated the beauty of a woman’s face, figure, body and soul, as
well as the power that these delicate individuals had over the characters and audience of his poetry, the observers of his artistic paintings, and most significantly the creator of these words and images, Rossetti himself. Johnston noted the main focus of his works and the focus on the female:

> Rossetti’s poetry and painting provide a vibrant glimpse into the eternal pursuit by man to find Beauty and Love. Although the power and the achievement of his language in the depiction of this pursuit are undeniable, his greater contribution as artist and poet is to those who came after him. Rossetti reawakened the artist to the glories of word and color that had dimmed in the hands of many in his time, but his own poetry and art are limited. (145)

That limit of Dante Gabriel’s works were influenced by women in his life, most notably his late wife Elizabeth Siddal, Jane Burden Morris who was the wife of his friend, William Morris, and Rossetti’s mistress, Fanny Cornforth who also served as inspiration for many of his works, as well as models in many of the corresponding paintings.

Johnston noted this union of Rossetti and the fatal female, “Walter Deverell, a member of the group gathering about the Brotherhood, had introduced Lizzie to Rossetti; and she appears in Rossetti’s work for the first time in his water color ‘Rossovestita’ (1850); she was a dominant force in his thought and expression until her death in 1862” (25). Lizzie Siddal not only became Rossetti’s lover but a woman he wanted to represent Dante’s Beatrice. Their love affair lasted for years before they get married, due to Lizzie’s financial
independence and Rossetti’s inability to control this woman into the chaste virgin.

“Rossetti’s delay of over ten years in marrying Lizzie may in part have been a result of his growing disillusionment with her when she was unable to fulfill his dream of the Beatrice-Virgin ideal projected into her” (Johnston 92).

Rossetti’s obsession with this female became his first step into the abyss of female sexuality that pervades the bulk of the works in his lifetime. Lioriel Stevenson noted the onset of Rossetti’s deadly addiction to the female:

The first and most devastating of them was Elizabeth Siddal. When he met her in 1850 he felt, as he told Brown, that ‘his destiny was defined; she seemed to be the preordained Beatrice to his Dante.

With her long neck and pale features, her green eyes and mass of coppery hair, she looked as if she had stepped straight out of a Florentine fresco. For the next decade her narcotic, debilitated beauty haunted his paintings. (35)

Rossetti’s obsession with Lizzie began to govern his ideals and separate him from the peers he conformed with. Stevenson noted the control of Lizzie on Rossetti and his professional life, “He jealously insisted that she sit as a model to himself alone, and his infatuation with her was one of the forces that disintegrated the fraternal intimacy of the Pre-Raphaelite group. Before long his adoration led to a proposal of marriage” (35). Rossetti should have been aware of how he was being separated from the men who he not only shared a love of painting with, but like Rossetti admired such “stunners” who served as models of their portraits. The separation of Rossetti from the group served as a metaphor
for what was actually happening to his mind; the female was altering it and
becoming the dominant force that threatened his masculinity. The women who
were once subordinate to the male's needs and desires now became the
seductresses that brought him to his demise.

Many of the women he depicted in his earlier paintings often were
illustrated as having blank stares as if they were having certain visions from
Heaven. These depictions were based on Rossetti's earlier ideas of the "Virgin"
and chaste female as seen in his sonnet and painting of The Girlhood of Mary
Virgin. The male artist created these females as incapable of the intellect of their
male companions; however, these blank stares were in fact an empowering of
the feminine being rather than a demeaning characteristic. Auerbach noted this
transformation of the gaze, "The entranced woman with whom we began,
seemingly helpless in the grip of her hyperconscious male oppressor, is fully
understood only in her translation to majesty. Her trance is not passivity but an
ominous gathering of power as she transfigures herself from humanity to
beatitude" (40). Especially relevant to his lover and wife, Lizzie Siddal, Rossetti
painted a memorial to his deceased wife, who was figured as minion under his
male desire to control. The subject was fully covered and still resembled his
earlier paintings and poems containing a cherubic innocence of the female.
Rossetti's Dantesque influence motivated him to not only write about his ideal
Beatrice, but commemorate his late wife in a symbolic painting such as the Beata
Beatrix. Certain details in the background and foreground incorporated the
influence of Dante and Beatrice. Russell Ash quoted Rossetti in a description of
the painting:

The picture is not intended at all to represent death, but to render it
under the semblance of a trance, in which Beatrice, seated at a
balcony overlooking the city, is suddenly rapt from Earth to Heaven.
You will remember how Dante dwells on the desolation of the city in
connection with the incident of her death, and for this reason I have
introduced it as my background, and made the figures of Dante and
Love passing through the street and gazing ominously on one
another, conscious of the event; while the bird, a messenger of
death, drops the poppy between the hands of Beatrice. (plate 30)

In a sense, Rossetti became Dante incarnate, and tried to fulfill his goal of
immortalizing his Beatrice. Johnston noted Rossetti's impassioned love for
Lizzie, his Beatrice, "Gabriel must have often sensed the many parallels between
his love for her and Dante's love for Beatrice. For Rossetti, Miss Siddal came
with much the same feeling of fate and wonder that Dante records in his Vita
Nuova about the appearance of his beloved" (26). Although images and ideas of
the pure virgin from Dante seemed to fade as Rossetti matured artistically,
certain images like the flower and the bird still remained constant, and became
tools for the female's empowerment rather than symbols of her weaknesses.
The Beata Beatrix was seen as the vulnerable Beatrice; however, this portrait
became the start of Rossetti's erotic female icons as Auerbach noted, "In this
erotic icon of Victorian womanhood, Rossetti's Beatrix approaches flesh. Life
and death, the transcendent and the inorganic, the timelessness of myth and the contemporaneity of technology, converge in an embodiment of womanhood whose supine stillness contains the powers of her age” (41-42). The female’s role and power began to change beyond that of Rossetti’s control, which was ironic for the fact that his primary goal was to control some being that ultimately controlled him.

Dante Gabriel’s ideas and subjects seemed to change due to many different situations going on during Rossetti’s life during Victorian times. “The completion of ‘Bocca Baciata’ in 1859 signaled not only a significant shift to oils, but also a shift in content. Rossetti began to turn increasingly to sensuous portraits of women” (Johnston 93). Rossetti’s female and her role in the relationship soon became not one of Love, but of a deadly nature. The commencement of this change began when Rossetti discovered hard times during his anything-but-sensual marriage, and met the two other females that shifted his religious ideals to those of fleshy yearnings like a pre-pubescent boy.

The troubled marriage of Rossetti was recognized in his poetry as Johnston noted, “Lizzie, now financially independent, began to demand marriage; quarrels became common between her and Gabriel. In spring, 1856, Gabriel’s ‘Woodspurge’ was indicative of the growing strife and grief between the two lovers” (28). “The Woodspurge” illuminated the idea of how Rossetti’s world of love was failing; however, also indicated an ironic numeric connection with Rossetti’s obsession with love. The idea that Rossetti gave up on his marriage was apparent in the first stanza, especially in the last two lines, “I had walked on
at the wind's will,-- / I sat now, for the wind was still" (3-4), where Rossetti's initial passion dies out and the marriage is doomed. Once that passion for Lizzie was gone, Rossetti found himself in the arms of other ladies, which is foreshadowed in the last stanza:

From perfect grief there need not be
Wisdom or even memory:
One thing then learnt remains to me,--
The woodspurge has a cup of three. (13-16)

The irony of the number three was no longer indicative of the Trinity or any other religious symbolism, but now revealed Rossetti's obsessions with the three significant females who controlled his woodspurge or life and encompassed his passionate works.

The combination of the failing marriage, along with Lizzie's failing health was what began to distort Rossetti's previous conceptions of the female figure. Lionel Stevenson explained how the depravation of a sexual love with his wife Lizzie, forced Rossetti to turn to other females for aesthetic and sexual relief:

During her recurrent spells of illness Rossetti gradually changed from a bedazzled devotee to a plying protector and nurse. His sexual needs being distorted by his bondage to a pathetic invalid, frustration drove him into the embraces of lustier women, while at the same time it thwarted the mood of energy and ambition which had produced an abundance of drawings and paintings during the first glow of his love affair. (35)

The love affair was one of an adulterous nature and changed his perception of females which Johnston explained, "As with Fanny Cornforth, who, appearing in
his oil 'Bocca Baciata' (1859), became for Rossetti the original for many of his later sensuous female portraits” (29-30). “Bocca Baciata” contains the single female that Rossetti was obsessed with, along with other deceiving symbols that were recurrent in all of his paintings and portraits. Lionel Stevenson noted Rossetti’s change from religious figures to his infatuation with a single sensuous female in his portraits:

After his first two canvases, both on scriptural subjects, Rossetti was unable for several years to finish any pictures at all, and when he resumed painting his work became more and more purely decorative and symbolic, usually a single female figure of anything but normal anatomy, garbed in flowing robes and posed sinuously against a formal background of trees and flowers. (17)

The beauty of the single female was illustrated with the help of models, such as his wife Lizzie, as well as his mistress Fanny who frequented his studio selling her body visually rather than opting for a more degrading profession of selling herself sexually.

Although Fanny Cornforth was the primary model to commence the sensual portraits, she also became an inspiration for a portrait and poem which depicted the rising problem of prostitution in Victorian society. Stevenson noted Fanny’s relationship as a lustful one because of her previous employment:

For relief from the frigidity of Lizzie Siddal, he found consolation first with a model to whom the naïve Holman Hunt had become engaged shortly before he went off to spend two years painting in
the Holy Land, leaving the girl in Rossetti’s charge. She was
succeeded in Rossetti’s affections by a woman who called herself
‘Fanny Comforth’ and who had been frankly a streetwalker before
she found a less disreputable vocation as a model. (37)

Fanny Comforth became the prime example of what happened to the Victorian
females if they were not captive prisoners of a male dominated society. There
were not many alternatives for the females beyond the domestic life as
housewife, which limited their opportunities to be demeaning and left them with
no self worth.

Opportunities for women in the Victorian Era were limited and forced them
to take on jobs that were shameful and paid very little. The social restraints
projected on women and the lack of work for women of the time caused
prostitution to become a rising problem in Victorian society as the introduction in
the Norton Anthology explained, “Bad working conditions and underemployment
drove thousands of women into prostitution, which became increasingly
professionalized in the nineteenth century” (1056). Many of the females turned
to prostitution as a means to make money, as well as becoming models which
led to infidelities that equaled prostitution. Stevenson noted the problem of
adultery with painters such as Rossetti, “Fanny Comforth was an increasingly
strident Habitue, and other models and artists’ mistresses were likely to be
present” (44).
Rossetti composed the poem, “Jenny,” with the potentially lustful thoughts of a sexual tryst with his model and mistress, Fanny Comforth. As Robert M. Cooper notes about noted prejudices:

But the ‘moral prejudices’ were as truly a part of the poet in the making as the fierce sensual passions he was to keep under leash until, at the age of twenty-eight, he met the voluptuous if uncouth Fanny Comforth. First his model, then speedily his mistress, Fanny as unlettered and unashamedly greedy and grasping, but she embodied the sensual delights that the young Rossetti could only imagine when he wrote in his first version of Jenny:

When the desire is overmuch,
And the hands meddle as the lips touch,—
When the bodice, being loosed therewith,
Tells the beautiful secret underneath. (Cooper 24)

These few lines exemplified a strong sexual passion that the poet was struggling with during the time of this poem. The intense sexual detail in the poem revealed a tempestuous relationship with the female character which became detrimental to the male narrator, and the composer of the poem. P.F. Baum notes that “it was Fanny who introduced Rossetti to the sins of the Flesh.” The sexual passion for Jenny portrayed her not as human but as an object of lust. One particular stanza noted the female as inhuman:

Yet, Jenny, looking long at you,
The woman almost fades from view.
A cipher of man’s changeless sum
Of lust, past, present, and to come,
Is left. A riddle that one shrinks
To challenge from the scornful sphinx
(Rossetti 67).

The woman was no longer seen as a woman, but only as a beautiful body to be ravished by the male narrator. Ronnalle Roper Howard noted, “The speaker has sympathetically created Jenny as a person. She becomes a ‘cipher’ of lust, impersonal sex object again” (107), and “Jenny has changed in his mind from attractive sex object, to subjective woman, to symbol of lust” (109).

In line 18 of the poem “Jenny,” there was an ironic depiction of the “virgin woman” who was prostituting herself: “Poor shameful Jenny, full of grace”. This line was giving reference to the notorious and chaste Hail Mary; however, it was juxtaposed with the sinful whore in the poem and painting. One critic suggested that this was illustrating the “ugliness of prostitution in contrast with the beauty of the woman”— “virgin and whore, shame and purity, beauty and ugliness are all brought together” (Howard 103). Jenny was not worthy of the privileges of “pure women” and she served an eternal imprisonment in her choice to prostitute.

The poem depicted Jenny as a crushed rose, or a tainted beauty, “Like a rose shut in a book / In which pure women may not look, / For its base pages claim control / To crush the flower within the soul” (253-256). The female here was an object that was not worthy of any type of redemption, and shall remain an everlasting symbol of “fallen woman.”

Rossetti’s unfinished painting, Found, depicted the idea of the female prostitute, which was alluded to in his poem, “Jenny,” written six years prior to the painting. The oil painting, Found, also introduced the idea of the “fallen woman,”
an idea that was fashioned by many of his fellow poets. His mistress, Fanny Cornforth could be seen as a model for this painting, considering she was practically prostituting herself as a model for many painters, as well as becoming a lover to a man who was involved with his fiancée and future wife. Although Rossetti was a component in this adulterous relationship, and in his mind he became the victim as Bram Dijkstra noted, "Prostitution having thus conveniently been made the sole responsibility of the prostitute, it was easy for the middle-class male to see himself as the helpless victim of these tempting sirens and vampires of the streets, these lusty creatures of the working class who did not seem to have any of the middle-class women's reticence about sex" (357).

When Rossetti became prey to the female prostitute, this portrayed her as anything but the weak, vulnerable character, which now was placed upon her male victim.

When closely analyzed, this painting was seen as containing three people in Rossetti's life: his mistress, his wife, and himself as an adulterer. The apparent characters, the prostitute and the man holding her, were Fanny and Rossetti; however, the calf depicted in the background was a symbolic image of Rossetti's fiancée, Siddal. The netting over the calf was a symbol for the illness that restrained Siddal physically, but could also be pictured as the mental instability she had as she watched helplessly in the background as her fiancée committed adultery. Not only did this physical and mental restrain symbolize the effects from her disloyal husband, but later became her depression from this adultery and a future miscarriage that pushed Lizzie towards suicide. Russell
Ash quoted Rossetti’s depiction of the calf, “As for the calf, he kicks and fights all the time he remains tied up, which is five or six hours daily, and the view of life induced appears to be so melancholy that he punctually attempts suicide at 3 ½ daily P.M.”(Ash 4).

The painting represented the male as a towering figure over a degenerate of society. Although the male seemed to be in control, the prostitute was the one in control. Nina Auerbach explained the female’s strength and the male’s weakness through the characteristics illustrated in the painting:

In the explicit narrative it bears the pathos of a last retreat to unfeelingness, overshadowing the woman as he net imprisons the lover’s calf. But simultaneously, the wall is an escape from that very net, represented by the lover’s clutch. Retreating from compassion, Rossetti’s fallen woman is aligned through the strength of the wall with the most substantial masses in the painting: the sweep of the bridge, the touched-in wall at the right, the wheelbarrow, the solid cannon beneath it whose firmness contrasts with the wrinkles on the lover’s boots, the ripples in his tunic. The lover is the dominant human figure in the triangle, yet his wrinkles and ripples give him a suggestion of instability, while the woman’s cloak drops solidly to the ground, as if it were sculpted rather than painted. (173-174)

The male developed into not only the victim, but a weak individual who could not fight the tempting forces of this sexual female. The calf in the painting
paradoxically shifted from Rossetti’s helpless wife to Rossetti himself, as the male who was unable to resist the female’s sexual power and became trapped in her ravenous locks. As the male was tempted by these sexual creatures he was in a sense the prostitute who was raped of his masculinity, as the female received pleasure out of the male’s fall. The further he tried to suppress and subordinate the female, the more power she emanated.

The painting *Found*, was ironic to the themes in Rossetti’s life for various reasons, as Johnston noted, “The theme of ‘Jenny’ interested Rossetti as a subject for painting, and in the autumn of 1854 he began the oil ‘Found’ that was to depict the prostitute discovered by her former lover as he passed early to market. The oil was worked on at various times throughout Rossetti’s life, but at his death remained uncompleted” (69). The similarities were that Rossetti’s love life was like an unfinished painting, one that illustrated the harsh reality of a love he tried to capture in his painting, but one that in turn held him as his own prisoner while the females flourished in his failures.

Rossetti continued to paint the female in settings that restricted her and enclosed her like the “rose shut in a book” that the poem *Jenny* imposed on the female. These restrictions in his portraits were much like the social restrictions on females that empowered them as Nina Auerbach noted, “The social restrictions that crippled women’s lives, the physical weakness wished on them, were fearful attempts to exorcise a mysterious strength” (8). The mysterious strengths were hidden beyond the beauty of the female, as well as the objects that surrounded her and served as empowerment rather than suppression. By
eternalizing herself in her own beauty, as well as the innate power she held, the male became ignorant to the powers she had to control him.

One poem that was especially interesting was Rossetti's, "The Portrait," because it expressed Rossetti's purpose for painting these Victorian women he and the other Pre-Raphaelites referred to as "stunners." Although the poem had some religious interjections, the idea of capturing the beautiful creature and the Love that the male character once shared with her is noteworthy. There was one stanza that was especially relevant to the idea of the male's attempt to enshrine and isolate the female:

Next day the memories of these things,
Like leaves through which a bird has flown,
Still vibrated with Love's warm wings;
Till I must make them all my own
And paint this picture. So, 'twixt ease
Of talk and sweet long silences,
She stood among the plants in bloom
At windows of a summer room,
To feign the shadow of the trees.
(55-63)

Here Rossetti portrayed the Love that made him feel warm once, but has flown away like a bird. The bird imagery can be similar to the Keatsian influence from the "Ode to a Nightingale," where the nightingale was a feminine creature that haunted the poet. Johnston noted Rossetti's Lizzie to be somewhat like Keats' nightingale in William B. Scott's account in his Autobiographical Notes of Dante Gabriel's impulse towards suicide at "Devil's Punchbowl":

Rossetti frightened his companions with what appeared to them to be an inclination to leap over the precipice. A few days later while taking a walk with Scott, Rossetti had the experience of a
chaffinch’s suddenly settling on his hand. Scott reports that Rossetti believed the bird to be the spirit of Lizzie, returning to foretell some evil. (122)

The morbid depiction of Lizzie incarnated as the bird that comes to the poet at a time of distress, validated how the female was present in situations that were malign. As seen in his earlier painting of the “Beata Beatrix,” the bird was a messenger of death, and in this case the foreshadowing of a death identical to Lizzie’s suicide. Lizzie’s suicide exposed her as the bird whose only escape was death as Dijkstra noted, “She must fly from her young man’s thoughtlessly deceptive caresses or become the abject companion to the little sparrow at her feet, which, clawed and battered, a helpless victim of the heartless sense of play of an evil-eyed, grossly materialistic cat, flutters its broken wings in a last, desperate, useless effort at escape” (3). However, through her escape she became a lasting figure in Rossetti’s life. Johnston broadened this idea of how Lizzie hauntingly reappeared in Rossetti’s works, “The memories of her continued to haunt Rossetti; and it is conceivable that her power over him from another world, with all its implications of the supernatural, encouraged somewhat the sense of doom and of the fatal woman in his expression of this period” (122). Rossetti’s mention of these wings can also be a reference to the dead lover who would take flight and leave him, so he had no other choice but to paint this beauty in an immortal portrait to preserve an eternal love with this woman. The following lines described the female’s isolation, “plants in bloom / At windows of a summer room,” (61-62), where there is an image of a female suppressed from
the outside world that continued to develop while she watched helplessly from
the window of her prison. The reason for this portrayal could have been because
his ill wife was a loveless prisoner who had left her lover eternally scarred from
her devastating death; however, Lizzie became a symbolic double of Rossetti
who was a prisoner to an emotional downward spiral that ultimately made him
take his own life. The coincidental suicide that mirrored his late wife’s is noted by
Lionel Stevenson, “Upon realizing his derangement, his brother took him to be
cared for at the home of a medical friend; but they were not aware that he had
brought a bottle of laudanum, and during the night he took a heavy overdose,
thus morbidly reproducing the circumstances of Lizzie’s death” (50-51). The
chilling similarities of Rossetti’s death and his wife, Lizzie Siddal, revealed an
unconscious control of the male by a supernatural female.

A prisoner to an emotional conflict with the death of his wife combined with
the affair he was having with Fanny brought Rossetti an immense sense of guilt.
Rossetti not only became a prisoner mentally, but the death of his wife was solely
responsible for the premature death of his once radiant talent. The symbolic
death of his works was noted by Stevenson, “His grief and remorse were
extravagant. Ignoring all the years when he had patiently tended her in illnesses,
he blamed himself for neglecting her and perhaps for hastening her death by
begetting their child; in a melodramatic gesture he displayed his self-
condemnation by placing the sole manuscript of all his poems in her open coffin”
(43). Lizzie was pictured like the prostitute Jenny, who debilitated Rossetti
mentally rather than sexually.
The poem *Jenny* foreshadowed the similarities of the prostitute to Lizzie and Fanny, and Rossetti’s poetic talent being the “seed” or the “fluid” that the female prostitute or suitor depleted from her sexual employer. The female’s control over Rossetti was a result of his attempt to force a love upon her that was non-existent. In a way, the strangling of the male with her ravenous hair served as a metaphor of the hindering of his sexual needs, financial stability, and what Rossetti most desired: true love. Rossetti so longed for a love to complete him and give him an equal love in return. Like a combination of Lizzie and Fanny, Jane Morris became an obsession for the artist. Infatuated by her beauty, she possessed the marriage material of Lizzie Siddal along with the sensual nature of Fanny Comforth. Janey arose as a new obsession for Rossetti beyond that of his wife and Fanny as Stevenson wrote how the attractive female became the “portrait” of beauty:

Rossetti and Morris were constantly on the lookout for suitable models, and in the daughter of a groom in a livery-stable they found one who was—in Rossetti’s favorite word—“a stunner.” Jane Burden at eighteen was tall and long-necked, with masses of black hair and deep-set dark eyes. The two painters persuaded her to be depicted as Guinevere in the murals, and soon they were both in love with her. (41)

Jane Burden turned out to be the third female to enter Rossetti’s life and become a significant influence in his painting and poetry, as foreshadowed by “The Woodspurge in these significant lines,” “The woodspurge flowered, three cups in
one," (12) and "The woodspurge has a cup of three" (16). This woman was perfect; however, she was unattainable to the lovesick poet. Rossetti had been a prisoner before in his relations with women; however, now the seed of his manhood was unable to flourish in the likes of Janey. Rossetti was faced with the combination of three women influencing his life, which invited a similar trouble that was foreshadowed by Lizzie's suicide. Stevenson noted Rossetti's trouble due to three females:

His association with Fanny Cornforth continued, though she too was now married; and his attraction to Jane Morris, while perhaps dormant, was not defunct. Lizzie's improved health enabled her to become pregnant, but when her baby was stillborn she lapsed into melancholia and hallucinations, and sought an anodyne in laudanum, which led to a condition not auspicious for her second pregnancy. Rossetti got away from his wretched home as often as he could, and one night in February 1862 he came back (possibly from a visit to Fanny) to find his wife dying from an overdose of her narcotic. (43)

The women in Rossetti's life were seen as leeches sexually, mentally, as well as a financial burden on the poet. Somewhat like narcotics themselves, they were tempting, controlling, and caused Rossetti's once pure world to collapse. His Eden not only contained an Eve or Lilith, but three deadly women who were the embodiment of every evil aspect against man with their sexual and deviant nature.
The burial of Rossetti's manuscripts was symbolic of the destruction of the male due to the controlling female and her tempting ways. Lionel Stevenson noted the irony of Rossetti's reconstruction of Jenny overpowering by his deconstruction from the female:

Disturbed by his distraught efforts to reconstruct "Jenny" from memory, Scott and Miss Boyd proposed that he take the macabre step of exhuming the manuscripts from his wife's grave. Upon his return to London the application was officially approved, and the papers were duly recovered from among Lizzie's still lambent hair.

(47)

It was ironic that Lizzie's "lambent hair" was like Jenny, "whose hair is countless gold incomparable." The beautiful hair that attracted the poet to his whore, Fanny, now became a force from the grave that isolated and numbed his poetic skills. Rossetti's mental struggle was revealed in these few lines of the poem, "Jenny," "The cloud's not danced out of my brain,— / The cloud that made it turn and swim / While hour by hour the books grew dim. / Why, Jenny, as I watch you there,— / For all your wealth of loosened hair" (43-47). This golden hair was recurrent throughout the poem, which illustrated an astounding similarity to Rossetti's own adulterous life, and how his affair with Fanny and the death of his wife clouded his images and the reason why his "books grew dim." The importance of the prostitute's hair was ironic to Rossetti's reconstruction of a poem about a fatal prostitute, and also became a consistent feature of the female body that Rossetti illuminated in his shift to the erotic representation of women.
Rossetti painted some of the most beautiful and sensual women of the
time period. Empowering the painter’s ego because of his interactions with these
beautiful creatures of nature, the females who would seem captive to their
creator became catalysts for the downfall of mankind and the usurpation of
male’s egotistic power. Dijkstra noted the use of the female’s beauty as the most
obvious threat to male’s power:

Beauty was the striving male’s supreme temptation. A woman’s
downy skin was like the gently caressing echo of a yearning voice.
The symphonic incantations of ever newly curving female bodies
were like the choral movements of a satanic invitation of worldly
abandon. Woman offered melodies of cradled melancholy to the
laboring brain of sainted masculinity. Steely-browed and lean-
joined Ulysses sailed past these aching calls, seeking financial self-
sufficiency among the shoals of vice. The late nineteenth-century
middle-class male already knew that Superman’s ego was powered
by gold. He feared that the Kryptonite of beauty could only weaken
the essence of transcendent power he knew to be embedded in his
seed” (235)

The male figure became suffocated and destroyed by the many facets of the
female’s beauty, as well as being robbed of every last drop of his masculine
seed. Instead of nourishing the male’s seed, the female was a predator that
robbed the male of his masculinity as Dijkstra noted:
The equation Norris had made between woman’s hunger for gold and her sterile hunger for masculine energy, for seed—her viraginous hunger for unfructifying sex, which, in Nicholas Cooke’s words, caused woman to ‘cease to be the gentle mother, and become the Amazonian brawler’—was to be found everywhere in the work of the painters of the period. (369)

This female predator was now the serpent we see in the bower as well as the medusa like creature who had debilitated man of all of his riches. The females not only became the serpent creatures in Eden, but soon became actual clinging vines that instead of being subordinate proved to be heavy burdens on the male.

Not only were Rossetti’s emotions awry, but he was being drained from these females financially. He had taken on the responsibility of maintaining and pleasing three different women, but he was financially hurting because of these parasites. Stevenson noted the idea of parasitic females in Rossetti’s life:

Fanny Cornforth, now about to be married for a second time, was a frequent visitor and a constant drain on his purse. Janey Morris, with or without her daughters, saw him frequently, either in London or on his holiday trips to health resorts. Though his pictures were fetching handsome prices, his generous gifts and the peculations of various parasites kept him in debt. (51)

The females in Rossetti’s life not only contained him financially, but he was sexually drained in his efforts and attempts to control his relationships. Instead of dominating them, they had a far more powerful control over him.
The females that the controlling Rossetti painted often were situated in a scene with some kind of mirror in the background or in the hands of the woman. The mirror held importance to the artist as Dijkstra noted, "The painters loved that gorgon like aspect of a woman's glance into the mirror, pseudo mythologizing it, as always, to dignify it as a subject. They especially liked to portray an obscure incident taken from the story of Perseus and Andromeda, described as follows by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in his poem 'Aspecta Medusa' (137). In the poem it was clear that the female was capable of danger through the mirror, "Till o'er a fount he felt it, bade her lean, / And mirrored in the wave was safely seen / That death she lived by" (3-5). It was also ironic that the mirror hero predicted the evil that was produced by the female's prolonged stare into her own reflection. Like the secret of the stream, when peered deep enough towards the bottom, the female's hidden capabilities and power were imminent. Dijkstra noted, "In the mirror woman's eyes became the eyes of the medusa hypnotizing her, drawing her ever further into herself. But the deeper woman was drawn into herself, the further she drew away from man's civilizing influence and the more dangerous she became" (137). Rossetti believed in this foretelling of evils through the female's glance, which was jarring why he continued to paint his women with these reflective objects. Dijkstra noted the power of the female's knowledge beyond control of man through her own reflection, "Rossetti, in effect, tells woman that she should look into the mirror only under man's guidance. Without Perseus to hold the Gorgon's head, without the mirror's reflection of woman's submerged evil nature, woman's glance would become the glance of
knowledge, of the most dangerous kind of knowledge: knowledge of forbidden things, self-knowledge" (138). The education of a female was not popular in Victorian times; however, this was even more detrimental for the fact that the more self-knowledge she gained, the stronger she was in her separation and victory over her male oppressors.

In the painting of *Lady Lilith*, the female held a mirror to peer at her strangling hair, one lethal characteristic of the woman that stood out. The portrait illustrated how she admired this full and lustrous hair, and tended to it as it was her most powerful weapon and lure to her male suitors. The crimson color of her hair became a symbol of the burning lust that victimized the males. *Lady Lilith* was portrayed as the supreme sexual object that destroyed a man’s Eden, which was illuminated on a mirror in the background. At first glance, the green bower in the background looked as though it was visible through a window; however, when looked at more closely the window became the mirror image of an entanglement of an unsafe garden much like the entwining hair of Lilith. The mirror containing a vision of Eden, along with the mirror reflection of Lilith was a reference to the female’s power and her control. Dijkstra noted, “Woman’s desire to embrace her own reflection, her ‘kiss in the glass,’ became the turn of the century’s emblem of her enmity toward man the iconic sign of her obstructive perversity, her greatest weapon in her reactionary war against the progressive male” (150). The beautiful hair reflected in the mirror is a symbolic weapon as the female’s power over the male as noted by Ash, “the white roses in the background may seem inappropriate, but they refer to the legend of all the roses
in Eden having been white until they blushed at Eve’s beauty” (plate 23). Eve’s beauty was like all the females illustrated by Rossetti, labeling her as the seductive predator that flawed the males’ bower and created a pit of death. This “Eden Bower” that normally served as a safe haven, now became a dangerous, darkling plain where woman was a sexual predator who inhabited it. Lady Lilith dwelled in the poem “Eden Bower,” and became the infamous temptress. Florence Saunders Boos noted Lilith’s sexuality, “The gold tress of hair, one of Rossetti’s favorite images of female beauty, is similarly associated with serpentine evil in ‘Eden Bower’” (169). Lilith’s gold locks were seen as the coiling serpent that would lead to Adam and man’s demise. Boos noted the biblical context that Lilith was placed in, “She is more limited in character than the humans she affects, yet able to pervert their destiny and happiness. Trivial in her motives, she is the Rossettian evil/seductive life force – amoral sexuality” (154). The poem “Eden Bower” opened with a portrait of a cold blooded predator, “It was Lilith the wife of Adam: / Not a drop of her blood was human, / But she was made like a soft sweet woman” (1-4). Throughout the poem, Lilith conversed with the serpent and longed to become the tempting force that was capable of the destruction of Adam. Lilith was resilient and hungered for revenge against her past lover as noted in these few lines, “O bright Snake, the Death-worm of Adam! / Wreathe thy neck with my hair’s bright tether, / And wear my gold and thy gold togethert!” (137-140). In a small number of lines, Lilith’s sexual power was symbolized by her deadly locks, which were the strangling force that controlled her male victim. Lilith symbolically became the serpent as Dijkstra
noted, "In Rossetti's 'Eden Bower,' Lilith—Adam's reputed first mate and the
original 'wild woman' who did not have the appropriate qualities of abject
passivity Rossetti valued in the household nun—claims to have been "the fairest
snake in Eden" (306). Lilith was the commencement of the unveiling of the
serpentine female.

The serpent female was one that had originated from biblical times, where
the female and serpent together brought a sinful fate on mankind. Lilith was
seen as a reproduction of Eve as Johnston noted:

The serpent Lilith extends the apple through Eve. Thus, the fall
from Eden for Adam-Man is the work of one woman, Eve-Lilith.
The fatal kiss lies at the center of the apple; and the woman's song
of love becomes, too late, the anthem of death. The kiss of passion
becomes one of maddened destruction. The music has not
changed; only man's discovery in it. (121)

Lilith became the symbolic double of Eve as the enticing female who swayed her
vulnerable male. Although the idea of the serpent was present in the poems and
portraits, the serpent was also seen symbolically to the way that the female
"strangled" the male in various senses. The coiling vine became synonymous to
the female body and persona, as well as her strong ability to manipulate the
males. Dijkstra noted the influence that Rossetti had adapted from his
predecessor Keats' depiction of his "La Belle Dame sans Merci":

He depicted her as entwining her prey with the double enticements
of her eyes and her hair, the latter serving as a symbolic lasso.
Given the period's cliché that long hair was virtually synonymous with mental debility, poets and painters found woman's tresses to be a particularly apt medium for the symbolic depiction of the dangers of the clinging vine. (229)

Rossetti illustrated in a similar way these women with the notion of entrapment; however, with their enticing characteristics and innate power the females assumed the role of controller and ruler of her unyielding kingdom.

The beautiful features of the females painted were the initial controlling effects that they had on their male viewers that were in complete awe of these erotic creatures. The strangling force of the female's hair became the feature that grasped the male's attention and clung to him with a tight grasp. The strangling locks were seen as a debilitating force on the male, although the male had a different motive for the strangling or in his words "the clinging" effect. For the male artist the idea of the clinging female was pictured in favor of the male as Dijkstra noted:

This commonplace was popularly expressed in the image of woman as a clinging vine. Mark Twain's Eve put the ideal representation of woman's role as follows: 'He is strong, I am weak, I am not so necessary to him as he is to me—life without him would not be life; how could I endure it?...I am the first wife; and in the last wife I shall be repeated'. This sentimental portrayal of the absolute dependency of woman on man was widely seen as the proper 'vinelike' condition for woman. (221-222)
The dependency that the female had on the male was the idea projected by society, with the subordinate female's responsibilities limited to that of housewife and mother. Without her male counterpart, financially she became dependent on the male for nourishment and survival. The male in a sense was seen to be her soil and the roots that were vital to her life. Although the female was still seen as this clinging vine, we must see the powers of her vine-like structure, rather than weaknesses imposed upon her. Dijkstra noted the change of the female's clinging role, "The master and his willing slave was the ideal: woman as a weakly clinging appendage to the forward-striding male. Unfortunately, the flesh was weak and woman delicious. Her clinging was not of the saint but the sinner" (223). Her clinging became one that prevented the man from succeeding as well as dominating. The female was a virus that adhered to any form of power that the male had, where from that power she fed to make herself stronger. This fall of man and the successful development of the female were referenced through the words "flesh," "weak," where the "delicious woman" was capable of certain destruction.

The females in Rossetti's portraits and poems were pictured and visualized in a vinelike surrounding; however, the strangling females were much more than vines. They ultimately became the serpent incarnate as the scaly creatures capable of destruction. Dijkstra noted the transformation of the female, "Instead of the suicidal nymph of ancient myth, she now became more than just a clinging vine: a serpentine creature, a strange, enticing monster of beauty holding a terrified Demophoon in the double grip of her hypnotic, snakelike eyes
and her viselike embrace” (229). This lethal creature of deceit that Rossetti inadvertently painted and wrote about, opposed the earlier Beatrice-like virgin that was originated from Dante and Keats. It was through his intent to beautify and capture the subordinate female that Rossetti discovered a darker creature. Dijkstra noted the discovery of the serpentine female, “The search for woman as the lily, the paragon of virtue, had carried within itself the discovery of Lilith, of woman as snake, the inevitable dualistic opposite of the image of virginal purity” (216). With the burden of sustaining or becoming the archetypal virgin, the female rebelled and became not only the complete opposite, but also usurped the male’s power. Dijkstra noted the usurpation of male’s power, “Clearly, to give woman any role beyond that of the household nun was to release the forces of degradation. Women who wanted to usurp part of man’s place in creation were going against nature, becoming mock-men themselves, caricatures of masculinity, viragoes” (211). Fighting against the chaste image man wanted for their females, the women used the male’s power against them and transformed into powerful figures. In a sense the females turned into warriors against the stereotypes that were forced upon them, as well as warrior-women to prove their power and success beyond what was predestined for them.

In Rossetti’s portrait Venus Verticordia, all of the elements of Lilith were present; however, Venus’ strength was beyond that of just a beauty. The strong sensual image of a “bare-breasted” woman was prominent in Rossetti’s portrayal of Venus Verticordia. The sonnet portrayed the idea of a temptress in the first stanza, “Alas! The apple for his lips,—the dart / That follows its brief sweetness to
his heart" (6-7). Rossetti's painting contained these beautiful but deceiving aspects of nature that all lead to a man's demise: the flowers, the apple, and the butterflies, along with her flowing hair like Lilith, her bare-breast, and the dagger that she holds. Auerbach noted the use of the bare-breasted woman's hands and the control that they depicted, "In Dante Gabriel Rossetti's paintings of explicitly mythic subjects these twining female hands move to the center of the composition, often giving the still paintings their only movement. But the serpentine interfusion they create is more sinister and less loving than those of Brown's and Millais' grandly 'good' women" (48). Critics may have seen that the woman in this portrait was trapped in a virtuous surrounding because of the flowers and the dagger that was imposed on her, but instead she used this passivity and took control of the portrait and the artist. She not only held the dagger that was aimed right at her bare-breast, but she also encompassed the beauty and sexuality that eventually lead to death for the male.

Rossetti's "Troy Town" recalled a Lilith figure who became somewhat of a warrior woman like the portrait of Venus Verticordia, where the male was conquered by a sexual beauty. Stevenson noted the appearance of the fatal beauty, "In two peculiar poems, 'Troy Town' and 'Eden Bower,' he tried to adapt the ballad with refrain to themes far removed from the folk tradition. Both deal with his other most frequent archetype, the ruthless woman who destroys a man by her seductive beauty" (63). Troy Town itself was symbolic of the once peaceful and serene bower that was now on fire from the passion of the seductive beauty. The first stanza revealed the trouble that the town had in
relation to the male's trouble with the virgin turned prostitute, "Heavenborn Helen, Sparta's queen, / (Oh Troy Town!) / Had two breasts of heavenly sheen, / The sun and moon of the heart's desire: / All Lovo's lordship lay between. / (Oh Troy's down, Tall Troy's on fire!" (1-7). This stanza not only illustrated the female's breasts that served as her sexual weapon, but more importantly noted the "Tall Troy" symbolic of man who was taken down by a female supposedly the weaker sex. The female's dominance from the start of the poem, as well as her constant refrain where she continually repeated the word "breast," demonstrated that this woman was in charge and fully aware of her sexual power. Dijkstra noted the abundance of the female characteristics that altered the man's ability to resist this creature, "Hair was not the only lure with which woman attempted to drag the male soul seekers back down to earth. Every feature of her material being could serve, and every legend and historical incident was combed for new suggestions of woman's perverse ability to unseat the male from his lofty spiritual promontory" (231).

The female's breasts were and still are an intimate and private feature; however, when so willing to uncover these succulent genitals, she assumed her natural power as a woman. Further than the idea of Eve and the forbidden fruit, Helen of Troy actually revealed that these apples were indeed a sexual object and had malicious consequences on the male who was tempted from the fruits of her sexuality. Helen's revelation of the fruits of her seduction was quoted in one line, "Each twin breast is an apple sweet" (43), and then later revealed that they are most definitely developed from the grounds of Hell, "Mine are apples grown
to the south" (57). These breasts were the forbidden fruit that the male could not deny. The females in Rossetti’s paintings all carried this tempting apple; however, where the fruit was not visible to the naked eye, it was symbolic through her tempting sexual nature.

Rossetti illustrated the idea of the forbidden fruit with the sexual female, in his portrait A Sea Spell. Rossetti included the tempestuous apple, although it hung in the boughs of the background somewhat hidden, along with the bevy of flowers, and the symbolic bird. The lute that the female plays portrayed the sexual enticement where she lured her male prey, similar to that of the pied piper. The woman attracted the males with this harmonic music, and once in her realm they were unable to retract from her spell. The bird in the background again was seen as the nightingale which represented beauty or the reincarnation of Rossetti’s dead wife Lizzie. However, considering the name of the portrait, A Sea Spell, it was only fitting that the bird represents the albatross coming to foretell danger to the mariner; the man in his journey to succeed the female.

The sonnet that accompanied the beautiful portrait disclosed the idea that the female was single handedly orchestrating a sexual spell over the male. The first stanza predicted this lustful trap, “Her lute hangs shadowed in the apple-tree, / While flashing fingers weave the sweet-strung spell / Between its chords; and as the wild notes swell” (1-3). The lute became her sexuality which was secretly intended to kill the male. The meaning of “wild notes swell” were a reference to how each note of her sexual song began to arouse the male victim. The prophecy of the male’s demise was clear in the last stanza where the female
sunk into her own spell to deceive the mariner towards his own fate. The idea of
the ill-fated mariner was apparent in the last two lines, "Till he, the fated mariner,
hears her cry, / And up her rock, bare-breasted, comes to die?" (13-14). The
sonnet portrayed the death of the female; however, with the use of the question
mark the poet foresaw a death that he believed was of the female, but in reality
was the death of the naïve mariner.

Rossetti’s other significant portrait to the dark image of the female as a
conductor of death was one of his favorites, Proserpine. The gaze of the female
was similar to that of Rossetti’s earlier “virgin” depictions, although this stare
represented some evil that was about to unfold. Rather than retaining strength
from beatitude, this female’s vision was her plot against the male that hoped to
subdue her. The vacant stare of the female in this portrait masked the deception
she was capable of, along with the idea of the serpentine predator. This portrait
was more revealing of the sinister nature of the female who was seen as the
predator of a once blissful bower. Auerbach noted this idea of female predator,
“Rossetti’s ‘Proserpine’ (1874) would be a virtual still life of woman with fruit were
it not for the serpentine grasp of wrist with hand, then fruit with hand, that creates
a gyre along which we move up to the face and hair” (48). The hands of
Proserpine contain a fruit that is not the apple, but one whose smell, taste and
feel were much more passionate than the archetypal forbidden fruit. Ash noted
Rossetti’s use of the pomegranate in relation to his female temptress:

Although the figure was originally intended to be Eve with the
apple, Jane Morris here portrays Proserpine, Empress of Hades,
who was confined there with her husband for most of the year because she had tasted one of the fruits of the Underworld, a pomegranate. Rossetti loved this legend, feeling that its theme—a woman granted only occasional periods of freedom from her husband—was analogous to his relationship with his model. (plate 32)

The smell of the pomegranate was like the song that the female in A Sea Spell used to attract her prey. The portrait of Proserpine incorporated one dark shade of green which is her cloak that signifies the dismal setting. However, the fruit’s skin and Proserpine’s skin were both of a similar hue, which illuminated from the dark setting. What was even more intriguing about the resemblance that Proserpine had with the fruit she held was the crimson color that pervaded the bare tone of the fruit and the female. Proserpine became the symbolic double of the pomegranate that contained the succulent red inside that stains the beauty’s lips. The once bitten fruit can be an allusion to the temptation of Adam, but more importantly it is symbolic of the lush fruit of the female’s sexual organs.

The female not only grew to be a sexual predator in nature, but she has become nature incarnate. Relevant to the forbidden fruit, the female is the tree and the forbidden fruit is the sexuality that she has to offer. The “truth to nature” that the Pre-Raphaelites longed to recreate, reveals the truth about the female who is nature. Dijkstra notes the female as earth:

Lodged in the earth, needing the earth—being, indeed, the very personification of that moist, fertile earth—woman was like a
swamp, a palpitating expanse of instinctive physical greed whose primary natural function was to try to catch, engulf and, if possible, absorb the male and make him subservient to her simplistic physical needs. Woman, as the embodiment of nature, was therefore continuously at war with man, whose very purpose was to go against or beyond nature. No longer the personification of the warm inviolate womb of domestic bliss, of motherly self-negation, woman became to womb of the earth, the all-encompassing, all-absorbing, indiscriminate receptacle of masculine vitality, the dark grotto of physical temptation opening mysteriously and wide before the terroried spiritual adolescence of man. (237)

The female is the tree that plants itself in man's realm in order to produce the fruits of desire. The land that was once man's domain now becomes infested by foliage that is deeply rooted in nature and takes control of that nature like the way it holds control of man.

In Rossetti's unfinished works, "The Orchard Pit," he examined the idea of a female tree that overlooked a pit of male victims. Dijkstra noted an example of the strong female in nature, "Women's relationship to nature is as the tree's relationship to the soil in which it grows. Desiree, Serge Mouret's sister, who truly is nature personified, seems, Zola tells his readers, 'to draw strength from the barnyard, to suck life up through her strong legs, as white and solid as saplings" (96). "The Orchard Pit" began with the poet revealing he had been plagued by a dream, which would probably be his unconscious fear of a woman
superseding her feeble roles as female. The description of the female depicted her similar to the symbolic power of Jesus on the crucifix, where she was strongly connected to the largest tree in the bower. Rossetti wrote:

In the largest tree, within the fork whence the limbs divide, a fair, golden-haired woman stands and sings, with one white arm stretched along a branch of the tree, and with the other holding forth a bright red apple, as if to some one coming down the slope. Below her feet the trees grow more and more tangled, and stretch from both sides across the deep pit below; and the pit is full of the bodies of men. (362)

Here the female was embodied within the tree of nature, a harsh nature where men's destruction was inevitable and the triumph of the female was the inevitable outcome. Through the many deaths of her male aggressors, the female was rejuvenated and empowered by the dead males' seeds. The same idea of the earlier Lilith was examined, where she was the female responsible for manipulating the male's fatal mistakes. With the seed extracted from the once masculine body of the man, the female became resilient and was able to flourish in a world she would call her own.

In the painting The Bower Meadow, the growth of the female was clear in the multiple depictions that were present. The painting was encompassed by beauties dancing with beauties, possibly rejoicing in their culmination of the bower and the male. These women who inhabited the bower had become the bower itself, making their territory unsafe for any male trying to trespass their
domain. Dijkstra noted the female’s role of tree in the bower, “The tree, of course, is a principal symbol of nature—it had for woman, or so the nineteenth century male mind conceived it, an irresistible attraction since it grew out of the earth in a state symbolizing that chronic tumescence which, if it were to afflict the male, would make him inevitably fall, in Ludovici’s words, ‘under the empire of women’” (94).

Illustrating similar ideas present in Rossetti’s, *Proserpine*, his sonnet, “The Day Dream,” portrayed this sexual temptress who haunts the once safe bower. Key lines in the sonnet conveyed the striking symbols of the female character such as, “Yet never rosy-sheathed as those which drew / Their spiral tongues from spring-buds heretofore (7-8) and “She dreams; till now on her forgotten book / Drops the forgotten blossom from her hand” (13-14). “Rosy-sheathed,” “spiral tongues,” and “forgotten blossom,” all have significant meaning to the visual seduction of the male character. There is a strong sexual context within those noted phrases that were even more evident in the portrait. The most significant was the wilted flower that lay in her hand, which could be symbolic of the paralyzing control she had over the male lover. The corresponding painting, *The Day Dream* illustrated the same ideas of impotent male and noxious female bower. In the painting the female looked trapped within the bower; however, she was the steadfast tree rooted in this blissful bower. By consuming the role of the bower itself, the female had control of the foliage that encompassed her in her surroundings. The strength in this painting was in the hands of the female, who with her green ensemble represented the bower, and detained the power of man
in the symbolic drooping flower that tries to grow unsuccessfully in this woman’s world.

Another one of Rossetti’s paintings that portrayed the male as this drooping organ of life was *Veronica Veronese*. In this painting the female looked in distress and saddened by her captivity, which was indoors and unlike the previous bower setting in *The Day Dream*. However, she was in control and was seen as a bower enrobed in the same color green as her background. She is the bower that controls the male in her seductive captivity. In two diagonal corners the color yellow was illuminated by a bird and the daffodil. The bird has become the emblematic of the male captive to the female’s song, where the only way the bird learns to sing is through the female’s intoxicating song. Although the bird was out of the cage, he is like the weeping daffodils seen in the bottom right corner. These flowers symbolized the male’s impotence to the female’s song as well as an insinuation that all men should bow down to this beauty.

The sexual female was shifty in her approach to conquering the male, where like the clinging vine she became an unchanging feature of the bower that overthrows the male. Disguised as a beautiful creature, or flower, she was seen as an object of beauty without intent to destroy. The artist proposed this floral setting to be a prison for the female or a symbol of a pure and obedient woman. Dijkstra noted the artist’s purpose of bordering these female’s with an abundance of flowers:

What better place to make certain that none of these ‘anxieties’ of a worldly nature could impinge on ‘the loving sex’ than the walled
garden of domesticity? After all, wasn’t woman fragile, and didn’t
she need the same sort of care as gardeners were wont to lavish
on flowers of domestic cultivation? The husband should regard
himself as the gardener and his wife as his flower. As a matter of
fact, in her very essence, her fragility, her physical beauty, her
passivity and lack of aptitude for practical matters, woman was
virtually a flower herself” (14-15).

Indeed, woman was a flower; however, she was not the flower she was portrayed
to be. She possessed the beauty of a rose, but when her stem was caressed
inflicted puncture wounds from her camouflaged thorns. If the woman was seen
as the delicate flower, the danger that was present in these beautiful creatures
was the havoc wreaking vines that supported the tempestuous petals. Man had
recognized woman as a beautiful being, but also saw her as a creature that only
caused the male’s power to be obstructed. Dijkstra noted, “According to this
popular belief, at least half the world’s population was made up of inherently
feebleminded creatures who, brainless and incoherent, were at best decorative
flowers but, far more often, blindly strangulating, clinging vines” (159). What
these men failed to understand was that these females were not feebleminded,
but if presented with the challenging male would strive to displace the ignorant
males and become prime rulers.

Rossetti composed love songs that illustrated these passionate females
through his use of flora in his songs from his House of Life collection. These
songs were relevant to the three females in his life, and ironically there were
three significant songs that portray the females as beautiful flowers. “Love-Lily” was the first of the three that examined the beauteous female and her intent with the male. The first stanza reveals a passionate flower:

Between the lips of Love-Lily,
A spirit is born whose birth endows
My blood with fire to burn through me;
Who breathes upon my gazing eyes,
Who laughs and murmurs in mine ear,
At whose least touch my colour flies,
And whom my life grows faint to hear. (2-8)

This passionate flower had an effect on the male, where the love of the lily imposed a lustful feeling for the male. Like a sexual predator, the love-lily became a secret identity for the female. Dijkstra noted, “It should be obvious that when a flower could become a temptress, when the virginal lily could turn into a hot-petaled rose of desire, the flower of evil was most likely only the initial manifestation of woman’s chameleonic eroticism” (242). The lily in this case transformed into a flower that radiated a lustful smell and pleasant presence to entice its prey.

The rose of desire was exactly what Lilith and Eve were when they chose to overturn the once pleasant bower. The second stanza of “The Song of the Bower” illuminated the dark bower that left man helpless and vulnerable, “Nay, but my heart when it flies to thy bower, / What does it find there that knows it again? / There it must droop like a shower-beaten flower, / Red at the rent core and dark with the rain” (9-12). The male's heart which yearns for a love that was deadened by the harshness of the bower bled with sadness. Not only was the male incapable to be an artist of love he was embarrassed with the burden of a
forced sexual abstinence. The drooping of the flower represented the lost love, as well as the male's genital region which was notorious for generating his masculine power.

Beyond the earlier idea of Jenny being like a "rose shut in a book," the seductive female had become a sexual deviant generated by the male's attempt to overcome her. Similar to Rossetti's earlier depiction of the plagued female prostitute, the female has become figurative of the negative restraint the females had over their male victims. Dijkstra noted this parallel:

Since woman, being a tool of nature, had a voraciously predatory hunger for man's seed, since she was a veritable siphon of regression ready to gorge herself on that 'great clot of seminal fluid' of a man's brain, it is not surprising that she appeared everywhere, and in every imaginable guise, to tempt man into perpetual and desperate tumescence. That is why the favorite mid-century association of woman with flowers, which had originally been intended as a tribute to woman's virginal fragility and purity, now began to take on the tantalizing ambiguity of Hippolyte-Lucas' street corner daisies. (240)

The fate of the male was in the hands of the female, where she became the beautiful flower that flourished in man's kingdom, and overpowered his seed. In a sense the male was like a drooping flower in the eyes of his more superior female. The spotlight was taken over by the female where she emitted an immense energy like the sun which aided her growth, while the male stayed in
her shadow like a weeping willow that was left in the dark. The unrestrained sexuality of the female resulted in the male’s impotence of his drooping sexual organ. Woman was like a weed or clinging vine that grew persistently in man’s land with the intent to destroy. As seen before in the previous sonnets and portraits, the tempting female masked the male’s death cleverly with an image of her own demise. The secret intent which was veiled by beauty and sexuality was solely responsible for the downfall and control of the male character. This evil objective was the works of none other than the archetypal femme fatale who existed to conquer the male.

This secret purpose was in the sole control of the female as Rossetti illustrated in his portrait, *La Bella Mano* and his sonnet “Pandora.” Like in the hands of the female in *The Day Dream*, the male’s fate was in the hands of the femme fatales. Rossetti’s sonnet “Pandora” portrayed woman as the ultimate beholder of male’s fate by her own two hands. Auerbach noted Pandora’s stronghold on man’s world, “The slow circularity of this movement reminds us that Pandora’s strong curled hand has the power to effect a dark transformation that injects an innocent world with evil” (48). Pandora’s act of releasing the evils upon males was evident in the first stanza, “What of the end, Pandora? Was it thine, / The deed that set these fiery pinions free” (1-3). The female’s beauty that was represented through Rossetti’s use and reference to flowers and ornate jewelry proved that the malicious intentions of the female were not always discovered until it was too late.
In Rossetti’s portrait, *La Bella Mano*, the beauty that inhabited the portrait seemed to be cleansing her hands from evil. This may have been understood to be an act of purifying herself; however, it was a shifty aid in the masking of any evidence of her true nature. The sonnet that Rossetti wrote for this female revealed her lustful nature:

O lovely hand, that thy sweet self dost love
In that thy pure and proper element,
Whence erst the Lady of Love’s high advent
Was born, and endless fires sprang from the wave; —
Even as her Loves to her their offerings gave,
For thee the jeweled gifts they bear; while each
Looks to those lips, of music-measured speech
The fount, and of more bliss than man may crave. (1-8)

The bliss that she was capable of was more than man could handle, and was a tool she used to control the feeble men. The bracelet in the painting formed the coiling shape of the serpent, which the female wore directly above her negligent hands. The inner fire that she contained by dipping her hands in the water was illuminated in the foreground by the mirror, which foretold the male his fatal future.

By putting all his cards in the hands of the female, the male became the naïve victim in Rossetti’s “The Card-Dealer.” The female as the dealer of cards was in a sense the dealer of death for the males that she played so coyly. The game revealed the colors of fate that were present in her bower, “In swift light-shadowings, / Blood-red and purple, green and blue; / The great eyes of her rings” (22-24), where the bower became her own deadly game of illusions. The bower that had once been safe now turned out to be a strange, dark land to the male, “We play together, she and we, / Within a vain strange land” (29-30) and “A
land of darkness as darkness itself / And of the shadow of death* (35-36). The
risks that the male took with the female’s game only pushed him closer to an
unavoidable death. One stanza cleverly used each suit of cards as symbols of
the female’s intent:

What be her cards, you ask? Even these:—
The heart, that doth but crave
More, having fed; the diamond,
Skilled to make base seem brave;
The club, for smiting in the dark;
The spade, to dig a grave. (37-42)

The close of the poem predicted a fateful death woman played with all mankind;
one where no matter how he played his cards with her could not prevail. Even
though his fate could be predicted by the cruel intention of her sensual breath,
the narrator was unsuccessful in deciphering the female’s dark abyss.

In Rossetti’s poem, “The Stream’s Secret,” there was an inclination that
the male dared to inquire about the female’s intentions; he would be dealt if he
had pursued a love with her. Beginning in stanza one, the narrator was certain of
the female’s secret, “What thing unto mine ear / Wouldst thou convey; — what
secret thing, / O wandering water ever whispering? / Surely thy speech shall be
of her” (1-4). As the poem continued, the female had every characteristic of a
femme fatale, who was only capable of a lustful relationship rather than the love
the narrator so longed for. The characteristics of this controlling female were
introduced in the few lines, “Murmuring with curls all dabbled in thy flow / And
washed lips rosy red?” (11-12). The sexual relationship that the female used to
manipulate the male was seen as the poem stated in an erotic description
disclosing the femme fatale’s plot:
Beneath her sheltering hair,
In the warm silence near her breast,
Our kisses and our sobs shall sink to rest;
As in some still trance made aware
That day and night have wrought to fullness there. (79-83)

The first indication of the fatale female was the silence near her breast. A dead relationship was portrayed with a heart that had stopped beating. The red lips, strangling hair, and overt sexuality of the female were all components to the success of her spell over the male prey, "What spell upon thy bosom should Love cast" (143). The male still was unsure of the effects that this false love will force upon him. The poem also made references to the "wrongs himself did wreak," which alluded to the male effortlessly being tempted by the female, with a lust that destroyed his Eden. The overexposure to lust shattered a potential love as the following lines revealed, "Pity and love shall burn / in her pressed cheek and cherishing hands; / And from the living spirit of love that stands / Between her lips to soothe and yearn" (109-112). Once in the hands of the femme fatale, like the drooping flower the male became intoxicated and disillusioned by the burning flame of lust. The fire that had been started from lust could only be destructive to the male's search for love, "As the unmeasured height of Love's control / The lustral fires are lit" (129-130). As the stream continued to torment the narrator with his unrevealing whisper, the male's fate was evident in the symbols of the telltale bird and the darkness that surrounds the victim. The bird appeared twice to predict the fate of the male in the following lines, "Say, stream; lest Love should disavow / Thy service, and the bird upon the bough / Sing first to tell it me" (22-24), and later one stanza in the poem revealed a certain death:
To-day? Lo! night is here.
The glen grows heavy with some veil
Risen from the earth or fall'n to make earth pale;
And all stands hushed to eye and ear,
Until the night-wind shake the shade like fear
And every covert quail. (205-210)

The covert quail came out of the darkness, and like the albatross predicted the untimely death that the dark-lipped femme fatale was responsible for. The realization that the female was indeed a scrupulous predator came only at the close of the poem, where the stream itself portrayed the sorrow and fate the female brought against the male, "Mine eyes that add to thy cold spring, / wan water, wandering water weeping, / This hidden tide of tears" (232-234). The water was wan because of the female's control over nature, as well as the male's vulnerable libido. All along the male was searching for the culprit of his demise; however, it was right in front of him in the water's reflection. The female once again drowns her male victims in the watery grave of her sexuality.

The dark and voluptuous lipped female was illustrated in most of Rossetti's female portraits. Like the lips of many others, Rossetti's La Ghirlandata became the prototype of the femme fatale. The dark red lips symbolized the blood-red wounds that the beauty inflicted upon the males, like the thorn-infested stem of the rose. The female in this portrait resembled one of Rossetti's own roses, Fanny Cornforth, the most sensual rose of all. Stevenson noted Fanny as the embodiment of the femme fatale, "Blond and buxom, she soon figured in Rossetti's pictures as the very incarnation of voluptuous earthiness. In his poetry he never conformed lust, but he was discovering that his
impossible vision of a love that should be simultaneously mundane and spiritual could be realized only by finding its two manifestations in different women” (37).

The ornate jewelry the female was draped with caused her to resemble the femme fatale seen in “The Card-Dealer.” Stevenson noted the fatal female’s resistance against the preordained stereotypes by transforming her into a sexually charged grim reaper:

An antithesis to this idealized view of womanhood is provide by another poem of about the same date, ‘The Card Player,’ which portrays a femme fatale who ruthlessly determines the destiny of the men who gamble with her. Her lurid jewelry and the dance hall in which she sits are in total contrast to the Blessed Damozel in her celestial paradise. (29)

Rossetti’s Astarte Syriaca displayed her sexual control, but was much more discreet and cunning about it. She was the sexual predator that Rossetti risked to paint, but through this painting revealed the femme fatale that plagued his works and life. Ash noted, “Venus Astarte has two torch-bearing attendants in this claustrophobic Mannerist composition with surreal lighting in which the femme fatale has become immortalized into a pagan love goddess” (plate 35).

The sonnet touched upon the femme fatale’s sexual characteristics and control, “And from her neck’s inclining flower-stem lean / Love-freighted lips and absolute eyes that wean / The pulse of hearts to the spheres’ dominant tune” (6-8). These few lines portrayed a universally destructive being that was in control of the male’s fate. In the painting, Astarte was holding her two hands covering her
most sensual body parts, which support the idea of the temptress who disguised herself as the modest virgin in the poems and sonnets discussed earlier. One critic stated, "Astarte, more so than Venus, is a potent embodiment simultaneously of all Rossetti's obsessions—legend, religion, art and love" (Ash 35). She gave meaning to the femme fatale, plaguing the male who used the various cards of women he was dealt. Rossetti took many risks with this sensual beauty who had beleaguered most of his poetry, art, and life.

In Rossetti's sonnets of The House of Life, he was able to express his sensuality and spirituality that was lacking in his marriage, which ignited his desired relationships with Fanny Cornforth and Jane Morris. Cooper noted Rossetti's spiritual sensuality or lack thereof:

One feels that with Rossetti, the soul never completely succumbed to the body—except, perhaps, temporarily. Rather, it was as if the soul, yielding again and again to the body's demands, never ceased trying to make the body itself 'spiritual.' For if the sexual act could somehow be made the expression of the soul, then the soul, by yielding to the body, would have triumphed. Body and soul would be one. (141)

Not only were Rossetti's passions aflame for Fanny, but he also yearned for the one woman he could never have but so longed for: Jane Morris. Critics argued that changes made to The House of Life sonnets were to mask Rossetti's everlasting passion for Jane Morris. Cooper noted:
Janey worried lest she be recognized in the sonnets, Rossetti reassured her, ‘Every new piece that is not quite colorless will be withdrawn and the book postponed’. (Part of the new colorlessness came from changing references to dark hair, which Janey had, to fair.) The sonnets of *The House of Life* are eloquent testimony to the raging conflict between the demands of ‘body and soul that ensued. (25)

There were strong implications of the female’s sensual ‘body’ and ‘soul’ in the sonnets that exemplified much of Rossetti’s sensual love poetry, where he confirmed his sexual desires in his ornate depictions of the female he longed to be with physically.

Most of Rossetti’s *House of Life* sonnets made direct references to the power that the female had over the poet in his lifetime. Stevenson noted the proven study of the three females that pervaded Rossetti’s sonnets:

In their existing order it would be impossible without external evidence to infer that the sonnets deal with three different women. The pathetically dependent Lizzie, the lusty and aggressive Fanny, and the aloof, cryptic Jane are as elusive in the sonnets as are the dark lady, the fair lady, and the beloved friend in Shakespeare’s.

(66)

These sonnets were indeed influenced by previous poets Rossetti admired; however, the content of them became relevant to the inner struggles Rossetti had with passion, love, and passion for love. Rossetti’s mythology of love was
revealed, "Where a great deal seems derivative in Rossetti's early art and writings, these House sonnets become his own voice, yet colored by his early 'masters' but now evocative of his inner self" (Johnston 71). Two of his House of Life sonnets that held significant connections to the role of women in Rossetti's poetry and paintings were "Soul's Beauty" and "Body's Beauty," because the soul, and even more importantly the body, of the women were the main elements that Rossetti had focused on in his poetry and art. The sexual power that the females in his life had over him was too powerful and became the dominating force for his poetry and art. Rossetti longed for a love of a woman who could not reciprocate equal love, and she only caused strife and suffering in his life. The idea of a forbidden and dangerous love was illuminated throughout certain sonnets in The House of Life, where the male was controlled and doomed due to the female that manipulated him.

In the first of the first sonnets, "Love Enthroned," the destructive nature and the correlation between the female and Death is clear, "And Youth, with still some single golden hair / Unto his shoulder clinging, since the last / Embrace wherein two sweet arms held him fast; / And Life, still wreathing flowers for Death to wear" (5-8). The image painted here was that of a seductress who smothered her lover with a physical love that he remembers. The flowers were important in connection with this seductress, where the flowers were symbolic of the beauty she beholds to ensnare her captor.

Death of the female's lover was also seen in "The Kiss," where the male loses the sexual battle, "What smouldering senses in death's sick delay / Or
seizure of malign vicissitude / Can rob this body of honour" (1-3). The key words
"smouldering," "seizure," "malign," and "rob," are all significant to the female's
power to design death to a powerless man. The male character became childlike
and weak compared to the female who developed into a dominant role over the
man-child. The female's passion that Rossetti became a victim of was
understood in the last stanza:

I was a child beneath her touch, -- a man
When breast to breast we clung, even I and she—
A spirit when her spirit looked through me, --
A god when all our life-breath met to fan
Our life-blood, till love's emulous ardours ran,
Fire within fire, desire in deity. (9-14)

This passion between the male and female forced the male into a loveless
relationship full of lust and fiery passion. Here the male looked upon the female
as a spirit who gave him power, and when the flame of their passion ran out, so
did the male's existence.

Rossetti's "Love's Lovers" was a beautiful sonnet that brought back ideas
of the archetypal Eve who tainted the male's once safe bower. The male
became an immortal creature, but only after he escapes the dangerous female
love by death. The temptress was presented as a controller of the male's
destiny, "His bower of unimagined flower and tree: / There kneels he now, and
all-anhungered of / Thine eyes grey-lit in shadowing hair above, / Seals with thy
mouth his immortality" (11-14). The male's fate was also sealed by the mouth of
his seductress, the master he knelt before and was powerless against.

The love that the male experienced with the female was a love that
passion overrides, and caused destructive results. Rossetti's sonnet, "Death-in-
Love," culminated the idea of the femme fatale who was responsible for the male's death. In the last stanza a deadly image of the female was illustrated:

But a veiled woman followed, and she caught
The banner round its staff, to furl and cling, --
Then plucked a feather from the bearer's wing,
And held it to his lips that stirred it not,
And said to me, "Behold, there is no breath:
I and this Love are one, and I am Death." (9-14)

The female here was Death, and became the force that plucked all hope from a love that terminates pulses of her male suitors.

In Rossetti's sonnet, "Soul's Beauty," he acknowledged the magnificence of a woman in "Lady Beauty," however, the danger of loving a woman so mysterious was illustrated in the first few lines of the poem, "Under the arch of Life, where love and death, / Terror and mystery, guard her shrine, I saw / Beauty enthroned; and through her gaze struck awe" (1-3). Not only did these lines demonstrate the lethal beauty of the female subject, but also exposed the "awe-struck" poet.

"Body's Beauty" delved deeper into the idea of the female temptress with references to Lilith. Not only was Lilith known as the seductive first wife of Adam, but she bore resemblances to Rossetti's mistress, Fanny. Cooper noted the strong power of the body over the soul:

His intended effect was to embody the spiritual; his actual effect was all too often erotic or sensual, with "soul" only a vague word lost amid "bosoms sundered" and mouths that "fawned," and lovers clinging "breast to breast." Too often it was body's beauty, not
soul's beauty, that triumphed, leaving "round his heart one
strangling golden hair." Fanny's hair was golden. (144)

Women became the embodiment of most of his poems and sonnets, where they
portrayed the physically desired woman who was a threat to the male's will
power. Not only were the male characters controlled, but more importantly there
was female domination seen in Rossetti's own life with the three women who
captivated and controlled him. His wife Lizzie's suicide put an immense strain on
the remaining twenty years of Rossetti's life, his affair with Fanny compelled him
to compose his most famous works, and his sensuality towards Jane Morris
tortured Rossetti; however, allowed him again to express himself through some
of his most famous works.

Through the endless symbolic references to women, most significantly
Rossetti's symbolism in nature, Nature itself became a subject that mirrored the
unconventional relationships that he had with the women in his life. As Cooper
noted on Rossetti's use of nature:

When moved to the point of symbolizing, Rossetti could look upon
Nature as a lover. If he was Nature's lover, he was a selfish,
unfaithful, independent lover, using her for his own ends, when and
how he desired (49).

Although Rossetti may have seemed in control of these feminine
creatures, the females intercepted this control by becoming the main focus of
Rossetti's most famous works. Rossetti attempts to confine these resilient
females in some of his most famous paintings was apparent in his use of a
symbolic nature setting for many of the paintings. The many exotic flowers present in his paintings were intended to be a restriction to the female as Boces noted, “Rossetti’s painted women were compressed and flattened into small, heavily baracaded settings” (227), however, the flowers were just another stealthy tool used in the female’s plight to destroy the male.

As in “Body’s Beauty,” the two flowers named were Rose and Poppy—the rose symbolizing the love and beauty, while the Poppy symbolizing inevitable Death and suffering because of this beautiful thing of nature. Nature in turn became the symbolic double for the female who morphed into a tempting sexual being. Nature is a supreme symbol of lover to the emblematic characteristics of nature; the flowers, birds, and apples, which all served importance to the portrayal of this destructive sexual temptress in man’s Eden.

Women prevailed not only in his art and writings, but most importantly they were the ultimate rulers of his life. His House of Life sonnet was split into two categories: Youth and Change; Change and Fate, where Change was a common denominator. Another word for Change is alter, which was what woman did to Rossetti’s life. That Change or alteration happened somewhere between Rossetti’s Youth, where he was tainted in his encounter with the female, and his apparent Fate, which became the only other option away from these women: Death.

Rossetti’s “Fiammetta” was the culmination of the fatal temptress in Rossetti’s life and poetry where the sonnet related her beauty to Death, and her
essence as the embodiment of temptation. The first stanza illustrated this Death causing woman as representing the actual tree of temptation:

Behold Fiammetta, shown in Vision here.  
Gloom-girl 'mid Spring-flushed apple-growth she stands;  
And as she sways the branches with her hands,  
Along her arm the sundered bloom falls sheer,  
In separate petals shed, each like a tear;  
While from the quivering bough the bird expands  
His wings. And lo! Thy spirit understands  
Life shaken and shower'd and flown, and Death drawn near. (1-8)

In the painting, A Vision of Fiammetta, Fiammetta became the "angel of death" in her beautiful garment where the halo she wore emphasized her beauty. She was the woman who plagued not just Rossetti's works, but much of his life.

Robert M. Cooper noted of Rossetti, "Although he showed some passing interest in religion, reflections on life, domesticity, and social and political problems, he remains a poet not merely 'isolated in art,' but isolated in only a part of the broad range that art may properly claim for its own—the narrow yet golden realms of poetry, painting, the supernatural, and... woman" (196).

Rossetti's unyielding fate of death was predicted at the start of his obsession with portraying and illustrating a chaste female who was transformed inadvertently into a femme fatale. Johnston noted the malicious intent of the femme fatale, "Lilith, as a depiction of the "fatal woman" in Rossetti's work, is found almost everywhere in Dante Gabriel's later expression. She is the voice of "The Orchard Pit" that draws man through love to death" (120). Like the males in "The Orchard Pit," the final pit that Rossetti was led to was a suicide morbidly identical to his late wife's overdose. Rossetti's suicidal death is symbolically foreshadowed in the first line of "The Card-Dealer," "Could you not drink her gaze
like wine?" (1), where the female's gaze was like the drink of death that left Rossetti with no other choice but to take his own life. Although the women did not kill him directly, it was through his passion for them which was addictive like the laudanum that he poisoned himself with, as well as his failure to achieve a true love with his female conquests. Johnston noted the true addiction that led to Rossetti's destruction:

John Henry Middleton, a friend of Rossetti, remarked that Dante Gabriel "... was addicted to loves of the most material kind both before and after his marriage, with women, generally models, without other soul than their beauty. It was remorse at the contrast between his ideals and his real loves that preyed on him and destroyed his mind. (93)

The females had numbing effects on Rossetti that were similar to the drug that killed him, where the mind altering games they played eventually led to his demise. The mental and physical anguish that these femme fatales had bestowed upon him was what caused his defeat literally, but produced his everlasting success poetically and artistically.
Works Cited


