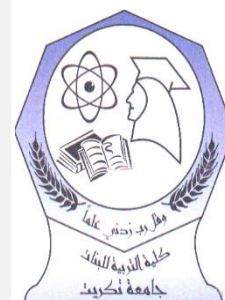




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THE FALLEN WOMAN IN DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI'S POEMS

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Keywords: - Rossetti - Victorian - Fallen Woman - Jenney	Abstract The fallen woman was a widespread phenomenon in the Victorian Age as a result of the social changes imposed by the Industrial Revolution. Due to social persecution, the vast immigration from the countryside to cities and the exploitation of women and children as cheap working hands in mines and factories, great numbers of young women were driven to prostitution. This paper is an attempt to explore Dante Gabriel Rossetti's treatment of the theme of fallen women in four of his poems: "The Bride's Prelude", "A Last Confession", "Found" and "Jenny". The first section of the paper is a biographical note on the poet. The second section is a brief background of the poem and the last one is devoted to an analysis of the poems followed by a conclusion which sums up the results of the study.
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المرأة الساقطة في قصائد دانتي غيبريل روزيتي

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كلية التربية للبنات - قسم اللغة الإنكليزية

<p>الكلمات الدالة:-</p> <p>- روزيتي - العصر الفكتوري - المرأة الساقطة - جيني</p> <p>معلومات البحث تاريخ البحث:</p> <p>الاستلام: 2021_3_16 القبول: 2021_4_17 التوفر على النت</p>	<p>الخلاصة: تعد المرأة الساقطة ظاهرة واسعة الإنتشار في عصر الملكة فكتوريا في بريطانيا وذلك نتيجة للتغيرات الاجتماعية التي تمخضت عن الثورة الصناعية. كما أن الإضطهاد المجتمعي والهجرة الواسعة من الريف إلى المدينة وإستغلال النساء والأطفال كأيد عاملة رخيصة في المناجم والمصانع دفع الكثير من النساء الى ممارسة البغاء من أجل العيش. يتناول هذا البحث موضوع المرأة الساقطة في أربعة قصائد للشاعر دانتي غيبريل روزيتي (1828-1882) وهي: "مقدمة العروس" و "إعتراف أخير" و "وجدتها" و "جيني". يقدم القسم الأول من البحث سيرة موجزة للشاعر، أما القسم الثاني فيتناول الخلفية الاجتماعية للعصر بشكل مقتضب، ويكرس القسم الثالث لدراسة موضوع المرأة الساقطة في هذه القصائد. أما الجزء الأخير فهو خاتمة تلخص بإيجاز نتائج البحث.</p>
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I. Dante Gabriel Rossetti

Born on May 12th, 1828, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) was the eldest son of an Italian poet, art scholar and political refugee. Rossetti's mastery of the Italian language enabled him to read Italian literature and to translate Italian poetry at an early age (nineteen); he also knew French and could read French novels and poetry (Doughty: *A Victorian Romantic* 30-40). He was also able to read Sallust (c. 86-35 BC), Ovid (c.43 BC-17 AD), and Virgil (70-19 BC) in Latin (Cary 16) and as it is clear from his paintings and poems, Thomas Malory's (c.1408-1471?) *Le Mort d'Arthur* (1469-147) and the Bible provided a major source of inspiration for him. He was also influenced by William Blake (1557-1827) who (like Rossetti) manifested a protest against the condition of art propagated by the Royal Academy as well as being a poet and painter like him. In 1847, he bought one of Blake's manuscript books at the British Museum (Cary 20). Needless to say that Blake manifested an attitude to the fallen woman similar to that of Rossetti's.

Dissatisfied with the world around him, the world of material progress and spiritual decline, Rossetti played the major role in founding the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood in the mid-eighteenth century. The main concern of this Brotherhood was a revolt against the social and aesthetic conventions of the art of painting in the early and mid-nineteenth century. For the Pre-Raphaelites, "the utility – the seriousness, the instructiveness -- of literature and art is a pleasurable seriousness, i.e., not the seriousness of a duty [...] but an aesthetic seriousness, a seriousness of perception" (Wellek and Warren 31). Pre-Raphaelitism is not to be looked at as a creed of "art for art's sake" due to the severe criticism the Pre-Raphaelites lashed against almost all the aspects of Victorian society, needless to mention the fallen women as one of these aspects.

II. The Background of the Poem

The dominating philosophy of the Victorian age was Utilitarianism. In the Utilitarian world there was no place for imagination, nor for passions, sentiments and desires; no place for literature and art at all unless they were didactic and utile. According to Richard Altick "Literature would be useful only if it were stripped of its decoration and made into a strictly functional vehicle for the expression of ideas" (Altick: *English Common Reader* 136).

On the religious side, the Victorian Age was the age of Evangelicalism which had many affinities with Utilitarianism. They are alike in their individualistic approach to man. In effect, "Evangelicalism translated into religious terms the *laissez faire* premise that every man was the best arbiter of his own conduct" (Altick: *Victorian People and Ideas* 144). Evangelicalism was associated with the rising middle class, and concerned mainly with the way men should live and the preparation for eternity by submission to the will of God regardless of how miserable one is.

The early decades of Queen Victoria's reign (1837-1901), were decades of social transition due to the great influence of the Industrial Revolution. Among the abuses of the Industrial Revolution were the miserable conditions of the working class, the wretched life of children in the workhouses and immigration from the countryside to cities. The position of woman at the Victorian age was far from pleasant. "Though among the aristocracy and higher gentry, women had considerable freedom of movement" (Altick 52) they were second class citizens in the eyes of law. The middle-class woman was dependent and submissive. She was "barred by the conventions of 'refinement' from all but a few occupations such as sewing, embroidery or playing the pianoforte" (Harrison 143). The most wretched of all were the working-class women and children; they suffered from long hours of hard work with little payment that hardly kept them alive.

On the other hand, the Victorian restrictions, prudery and the cult of chastity, added to the Industrial Revolution, were the reasons behind the wide-spread

phenomenon of prostitution and sexual immorality. According to Harrison, "prostitution was referred to by the Victorians as the Great Social Evil" (Harrison 147), and despite the great penalties on "fallen women", the *Westminster Review* in 1850 estimated the number of prostitutes to be "eight thousand in London and fifty thousand for England and Scotland" while Brace bridge Hemyng gave the number of "eighty thousand for London alone" (ibid. 147-148) bearing in mind that the whole population of London was about one and a half million

III. The Fallen Woman in Rossetti's Poems

Rossetti treats the fallen women in many of his poems. Variations of this theme recur in "The Bride's Prelude", "A Last Confession", "Found", "Body's Beauty (Lilith)", "Dante at Verona", "The Orchard Pit" and "Jeeny". In "The Bride's Prelude", (an unfinished poem in 184 quartets), for instance, Alyose, the bride, while waiting for her bridegroom on her wedding day, tells her sister, Amelotte, of the long-hidden shame of her past, when she was seduced by Lord Urscelyn. In this poem as in most other poems, Rossetti transfers a Victorian situation to another time and place to achieve an aesthetic distance in order to criticize the Victorian society's hypocrisy concerning morality and chastity. Though in this poem "the setting is in France in some stormy time of the Middle Ages" (Masefield 11-12), it was the one-sidedness of the education, the religious preachings Alyose had in her girlhood and the patriarchal society legalizing women subjugation which made of her a fallen woman in womanhood:

This was the bride's sad prelude-strain:-

"T' the convent where a girl

I dwelt till near womanhood

I had but preachings of the rood

And Aves told in solitude.

(Rossetti: *Poetical Works* Henceforth: *PW* 41)

This was the type of education in the early Victorian family, where sex was unmentionable, so that children grew up puzzled and ignorant of the facts of life. This coercion was one of the major reasons behind prostitution (Harrison 144-146). Alyose "had learned nothing of youth's discourse", all that she learned was about "holy things"; a sort of evangelical preaching concerned mainly with preparation for eternity rather than with worldly life (Altick 165).

In "A Last Confession" (which is also a lengthy poem) it is a foundling girl that turns to be a fallen woman. The title which is completely imaginary is told by an Italian *maqui* who fought for the Italian resistance against the Austrians in 1848. The girl is a victim of hunger and poverty that drove her parents to leave her on the hillside because they had no food to give her:

But when I asked her this, she looked again
Into my face and said that yestereve
They kissed her long, and wept and made her weep,
And gave her the bread they had with them,
And then had gone together up the hill.
(PW 20)

The Italian *maqui* adopted this "heavenly child", and loved her when she grew up into womanhood, but she escaped to another life; that of a prostitute. He suspected her, questioned her, but she "seemed stubborn and heedless". He killed her when he discovered the hard laugh of a fallen woman, unlike the laugh "Which rose from her sweet childish heart" (PW 19). As such, Rossetti presents two points of view; the first is that of the innocent girl as a "heavenly child" just after her parents left her because of poverty; the other that of the fallen woman, after she was degraded and dehumanized by society. Again, to achieve an aesthetic distance which enables him to criticize Victorian society, Rossetti uses Italian story, Italian time and place.

"Found" is a sonnet written by Rossetti, as he says in the subtitle of the poem, (For a Picture) which he painted earlier. In the painting, as well as in the sonnet, a lover from the countryside comes to city looking for his beloved who migrated to the city, driven by poverty. However, she is now a fallen woman, and therefore, she refuses to go back with him:



"Found" is painted between 1854-1858, oil on canvas (80 x 91 cm) and kept now at Delaware Art Museum (de la Sizeranne 163).

The sonnet records the moment the young man finds his beloved in the city and catches her attempting to take her back with him but in vain because she denies that she has ever known him:

.... And, Oh God! To-day
He only knows he holds her; --but what part
Can life now take? She cries in her locked heart, --
"Leave me – I do not know you – go away!"
(PW 363)

The sonnet form, according to John Dixon Hunt, enables Rossetti to "emulate the iconic quality of visual image" (Hunt 251). In his "sonnets for pictures", Rossetti tries to create the same sensation he felt in front of the work of art (some of the pictures that inspired his sonnets were his own, like "Found"). The sonnet played a central role in the shortening and condensation of the portrait poem. Rossetti's conception of the sonnet is that it is a "moment's monument" which immortalizes special moments in this mutable and changing world, he says

The sonnet is a moment's monument
Memorial from the soul's eternity
To one dead deathless hour...
(PW 176)

This can easily be seen in "Found" which immortalizes an emotionally intensive moment.

Though there are many references to the fallen women in Rossetti's poetry, his masterpiece, in which he splendidly expresses his attitude towards this social problem, however, is "Jenny". According to John Masefield, the subject of the fallen woman might have been in the poet's mind for several years. He had dealt with this topic in his painting "Found" and in the poem on his picture bearing the same title (Masefield 14). The poem is a magnificent meditation on this aspect of the "social evil", as prostitution was described in the Victorian Age. Unlike his contemporaries, Rossetti is daring in his approach to the fallen woman in an age in which the very name was taboo. He hesitated long before sending his aunt, Sharlotte Lydia Polidori, a copy of his *Poems* because he feared that the poem might be too startling for her. The letter he sent her in 1870 shows that he was quite aware of the unconventionality and of the "good results" of this poem:

I am not ashamed of having written it (indeed I assure you that I would never have written it if I thought it unfit to be read with good results); but I feared it might startle you somewhat, and so put off sending you the book. (Doughty: *Letters*, II, 880).

Using the dramatic monologue, in which a man addresses a tired prostitute asleep beside him with her head upon his knee, through a series of images, the poet raises her from a degraded woman to a rather holy creature. First, she is a "queen of kisses", with blue eyes and a golden incomparable hair; then a flower, though the product of a hotbed:

Fair Jenny mine, the thoughtless queen
Of kisses which the blush between
Could hardly make much daintier;
Whose eyes are as blue skies, whose hair
Is countless gold incomparable:
Fresh flower, scarce touched with signs that tell
Of Love's exuberant hotbed,
(PW 83)

These images culminate in the scene when Jenny "becomes a guilded saint-like figure sat among flowers –a counter-Madonna ... hailed in a parody of Gabriel's salutation to Mary" (Hersey 23): "poor shameful Jenny, full of grace", (PW 83) and even her lamp is like a wise virgin's: "Your lamp my Jenny, kept alight/ Like a wise virgin's, all one night" (PW 92). The "warm sweets" of her body are "all golden in the lamplight's gleam," (PW 84) and even her hand, that has neither rings nor gloves, is described in religious terms as:

Ah! lazy lily hand, more bless'd
If ne'er in rings it had been dress'd
Nor ever by a glove conceal'd
(PW 86)

The poet's intention in creating this portrait of what Hersey calls "the saintly whore" is to suggest that fallen women are victims of their own society. Jenny's saintly beauty is God's creation while her miserable condition is but the result of what man's ill acts have done to her. She is not treated as a human being, but as a thing; a means for man's pleasure:

Whose acts are ill and his speech ill,
Who, having used you at his own will,
Thrusts you aside, as when I dine
I serve the dishes and the wine.
(PW 85)

Jenny is a new comer to the city: "Jenny you know the city now," (PW 87); the word "now" implies that she did not know the city before. This recalls to mind Rossetti's painting *Found*, and his sonnet on it, in which a poor girl is found as a prostitute by her lover from the country as he comes in the early morning. In this city

everything is enrolled in market lists; everything is bought and sold, even beauty is dehumanized, though not enrolled in lists yet:

Some things which are not yet enrolled
In market lists are bought and sold.

(PW 87)

With deep insight Rossetti foretells Jenny's future when she grows old; when there will be nobody in this materialistic city to care for the worn-out beauty, no longer of interest. Even the city street-lamps are surrealistically described as "fiery serpents" ready to devour her heart:

When wealth and health slipped past you stare
Along the streets, and there,
Round the long park, across the bridge
The old lamps at the pavement's edge
Wind on together and apart,
A fiery serpent for your heart.

(PW 87)

More striking than this is Rossetti's "balancing-off" of the two "antithetical institutions" (Hersey 26), namely of prostitution and marriage. This is revealed through the speaker's meditation; while he was gazing at the sleeping prostitute he sees his cousin's image. His cousin, Nell, and Jenny are "two sister vessels" made of the same lump, by the same creator, but it is man who transformed the latter into what she is now:

The potter's power over the clay!
Of the same lump (it has been said)
For honour or dishonor made,
Two sister vessels. Here is one.

(PW 88)

The speaker's cousin, Nell, is just like Jenny, "fond of fun/ And fond of dress, and change, and praise". (PW 88), except that she is decent and pure. This antithetical image is supported by the historian Harrison:

Behind the early Victorian family, and essential for the maintenance of its façade, was the great underworld of prostitution. A relationship of mutual dependence linked the two institutions together; they were in fact the obverse and the reverse of the same coin. (Harrison 148)

Having brought together Nell and Jenny, "So pure, --so fall'n" (PW 89), Rossetti makes them exchange roles through a slow process of interaction. In later generations, Nell's offspring will fall while Jenny's offspring will rise. The one who abhors prostitutes someday, may see his own daughter as frail and lost as Jenny is; looking

into his daughter's eyes he may see his own mother just as the speaker sees his cousin Nell into Jenny's eyes:

Scorned then, no doubt, as you are scorn'd!
Shall no man hold his pride forewarn'd
Till in the end, the Day of Days
At Judgement, one of his own race,
As frail and lost as you, shall rise, --
His daughter, with his mother's eyes?
(PW 89)

This division of womankind into two tribes: the fallen and the pure, is the result of what man has done, and therefore, only man can atone for this unkindness:

What has man done here? How atone
Great God, for this which man has done?
(PW 90)

However, there is no hope in the awakening of this sleeping prostitute. Unlike Hunt's woman in his painting *The Awakening Conscious* who is morally awake, Jenny sleeps despite the speaker's summonings. Jenny's awakening does not lie in herself but in the awakening of the other tribe of womankind: "the pure" and of the society as a whole. For the division of womankind, as Hersey puts it, "ruins one tribe and prevents the other from succoring its fallen sisters" (Hersey 26). The pure women themselves, need awakening because they are unwilling to see their sisters as unerring victims of an erring social system:

If but a woman's heart might see
Such erring heart unerringly
For once! But that can never be.
(PW 90)

Fortified with a perspective insight into his social surroundings, Rossetti lashed severely against moral hypocrisy. Perhaps the outstanding feature of his anti-Victorian attitude is his depiction of the fallen woman whom he sees as a victim of social disintegration wrought out by industrialization. The tone of the speaker (the poet) throughout this poem is very important; he sympathizes with the fallen women looking at her positively as equal to his cousin Nell and to any other Victorian woman from the middle or upper classes.

IV. Conclusion

Though prostitution was considered the worst evil of the Victorian society, it was unmentionable due to Victorian pride, the cult of chastity, social restrictions and coercion. To deal with such a theme, therefore, was a challenge and an audacious adventure. In all these four poems the main theme is the fallen woman depicted in different settings. The setting of "The Pride's Prelude" is in France, "A Last

Confession" is in Italy, "Found" and "Jenny" in a city which is supposed to be London. Choosing a foreign or unidentified setting was for the sake of achieving an aesthetic distance to criticize Victorian society and to avoid coercion. However, in all these poems, the fallen woman is a victim of her society. In "The Pride's Prelude" she is a victim of one-sided teaching and Evangelical preaching; In "A Last Confession" for instance, she is victimized twice: firstly by her family and secondly by the Italian *maqui*; In "Found" she is driven by poverty to leave the countryside to prostitute herself in the city. Finally, Jenny, as a victim of the same forces, is described in auspicious and favourable terms such as "fair jenny", "the thoughtless queen", "more blessed", a "Madonna" a "Virgin" and a Saintly figure. She is elevated as a "Blessed Domozel" to emphasize her innocence and to accuse Victorian society of victimizing her.

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