

The Awakening and Understanding of Women's "Independent Personality": A Brief Analysis of the Female Image in Dante Rossetti's Works

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ABSTRACT

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) was a prominent pre-Raphaelite artist in 19th-century Britain, known for his beautiful female figures in his paintings. This article mainly studies the impressive female figures in Rossetti's paintings in the context of the social era, attempts to explore the influence and deeper implications of the social situation in the context of the British feminist movement in the 19th century on his expression of female figures, and can interpret Rossetti's concept of women through his paintings, as well as think about the influencing factors in the formation of his concept of women.

KEYWORDS

Dante gabriel; Rossetti; 19th-century Britain; Views on women; Works by women

1 Female figures in rossetti's works



Figure 1 Rossetti 'Lady Lilith'

1.1 The image of the "witch" with a mature individual - "Lady Lilith"

Dante Rossetti lived in an era of great social change in 19th-century Britain, and the Victorian feminist movement, which lasted nearly a hundred years, ran through Rossetti's entire creative career. For the creation of "Lady Lilith", Rossetti praised the "notorious" female figure with elegant language in his poem "Body's Beauty" :

"Roses and poppies are her flowers;

Ah, Lilith!

The fragrance of your hair, the kisses that fall, and the gentle sleep all fascinate him."

After much creation and inspiration from the paintings of his predecessors, Rossetti finished his painting, "Lady Lilith," in 1872-1873. In his work, Lilith is a beautiful woman with thick blonde hair. She sits in front of a mirror, combing her hair in a laid-back and elegant manner, with a comb in one hand and a mirror in the other, allowing her thick hair to fall like a golden waterfall on her chest. She seemed to be lost in thought, her eyes fixed on herself in the mirror, her brows slightly furrowed. One message we can get here is that Lilith is thinking with self-awareness, and Rossetti's Lilith seems to have some kind of lively wisdom, and her gaze is no longer focused on the outside of the picture -- and the viewer, but is fully absorbed in her self in the mirror. Traditionally, women who can think are considered dangerous. Thinking means having self-awareness, and thus having the spirit of self-judgment and rebellion, while men are afraid of women's autonomous thinking, and fear leads them to criticize "intellectual" women with the ultimate "evil" that can be achieved in a patriarchal society. A closer look reveals that Lilith is surrounded by flowers, and the rich floral elements also carry profound symbolic meanings. As described in Rossetti's own poems, the flowers here are generally regarded as roses and poppies, each with

a distinct symbolic meaning. Roses are a symbol of love, like Lilith's beautiful and charming appearance, symbolizing feminine charm. The poppy, the flower of the goddess of sleep and dreams, symbolizes the poison of temptation and death. Rossetti, the author, believes that Lilith is a dual image of feminine charm and allure as well as danger, and he has created a very classic and representative Lilith through his unique expression and shaping techniques. This provides a glimpse into Rossetti's understanding of the rebellious "evil woman" image and the complexity of his view of women. He endows the stigmatized woman with an image that is both beautiful and intelligent, but also subtly reveals her danger.

Rossetti was not a direct supporter of the women's movement, and his male identity added a different perspective to the shaping of his view of women. But his attitude towards Lilith and the feminist movement can be seen from his letters to the editor of the Athenaeum, Stephens. "The information you want me to give about Lilith is that she was the first strong-willed woman and the first advocate of women's rights," he wrote. Rossetti affirmed Lilith as a "new woman" with a rebellious and independent consciousness, and such art was considered countermainstream by the social aesthetics of the time, that is, it "rebelled" against the most typical and generally accepted image of a woman - gentle, humble, maternal and pure. This might be seen as Rossetti's perception of women was already non-mainstream. He regarded women as complex and multi-faceted independent individuals, not just loyal "angels of the family".

1.2 Awakening of self-awareness - the annunciation

Society's demands on women often have a more straightforward way, which is more dependent on her own physiological value, namely the ability to reproduce. The conception, as one of the most significant plots in Christian tradition, marks the beginning of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and has been repeatedly depicted and created by artists throughout history.

According to the Gospel of Luke, the archangel Gabriel came to Mary and greeted her: "Blessed woman, I send my greetings to you; the Lord is with you." Mary was frightened and alarmed by the sudden arrival of the angel, and did not understand what such a greeting meant (Luke 1:29). From medieval tomb murals to the Renaissance and the centuries that followed, the theme of the "declaration of conception" seemed to follow some strange logic of creation, and artists depicted Maria in their paintings, whether devilishly accepting or frightened, as a servant girl completely obedient to God. Such depictions are a perfect representation of the Bible, as Mary humbly responds: "I am the servant of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word." (Luke 1:38) Representative artists who have depicted the theme of the Annunciation include Da. Leonardo Da Vinci, Sandro Botticelli, Fra. Angelico et al.



Figure 2 Leonardo Da Vinci's annunciation



Figure 3 Sandro. Botticelli, the annunciation of the virgin



Figure 4 Fra. Angelico, the annunciation

As a pre-Raphaelite artist, Rossetti wanted to revive the spirit of medieval artisans, but that didn't mean he had to copy their paintings. He intended to learn from the creative attitude of his predecessors, read the accounts of the Bible with sincerity, and wanted to present such a holy scene. But it is not difficult to notice that Rossetti has his own unique perspective in expression, and he hopes to present it in a new way and make the viewer look at this ancient story with a new perspective. Rossetti completed the Annunciation in 1850, one of his early works, but we can still detect his unique feminine concept in it. In Rossetti's picture, the archangel Gabriel walks in flames, holding a white lily in his hand, with white doves symbolizing the Holy Spirit surrounding him, his extremely handsome profile shining under the halo, and his expression is either compassionate or indifferent, symbolizing an incomparable divine aura. At his side, Mary is curled up in the corner, her head slightly tilted forward, her red hair loose behind her, with a few strands of hair lifted by the breeze, looking disordered. She is dressed in a pale robe, like a bewildered flower bud clinging to the equally pale wall, with her hands carelessly pinned behind her crooked legs, like a lamb waiting to be slaughtered. It is notable that Maria's expression is depicted, with her greyish-blue pupils listless and empty, revealing neither astonishment nor submissive acceptance, but a fear from the depths of her soul and a near-calm despair. Fear made her shiver and helpless, and despair made her expressionless. The furnishings around her were different from the warm and harmonious interiors of his previous paintings, but instead a cold and dim atmosphere. The only colors in the picture came from the bright red tapestries on the right and the indigo curtains in the background, and these few color elements seemed to be swept away by a vast expanse of white, creating a grayish-white space. In the traditional impression, white represents purity, the perfect purity without any pollution, but in this picture, the pure tranquility is invisible. Indigo and large areas of white create a tense and uneasy atmosphere, while the author uses an extremely precise spatial perspective to create a sense of depth, compressing the two into a compact range. Although it depicts their interaction, the oppression and tension conveyed through the picture further express Gabriel's oppression and Maria's helplessness.

Rossetti's Annunciation caused controversy in society at the time because his style was quite different from traditional

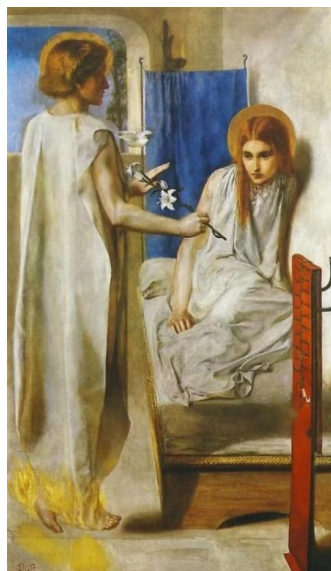


Figure 5 Dante. Rossetti's annunciation

religious paintings. Critics argue that the picture is too plain and the colors are too thin, thus lacking the crucial sense of sanctity. But when combined with Rossetti's portrayal of Maria, we might think that he has closely integrated this subject with reality, where Maria is no longer a humble and submissive servant of God, but a young woman who is forced to become pregnant and has to accept her fate. Rossetti goes further by his rebellion against the conventional narrative to show his new perspective on society, and we may conclude that he affirms the existence of women as independent individuals in reality and expresses in a subtle and profound way the oppression of women in society.

1.3 The Growth and self-awareness of women - persephone



Figure 6 Dante. rossetti's persephone

The figures in ancient Greek and Roman mythology were always depicted as different stories and characteristics of The Times through painters, writers and poets according to the changing times. Persephone can be regarded as a microcosm of female consciousness and female growth in Victorian Britain. Rossetti's "Persephone" was completed in 1874, and the female figures in the painting are no different from Rossetti's previous painting style. He uses the typical colors of the pre-Raphaelite school, which are bright, rich and solemn. The delicate depiction and dramatic play of light and shadow also create a rich atmosphere and a sense of mystery for the entire work. In the picture, Persephone, dressed in a classic dark green robe, stands sideways in silence by a window that emits a faint blue light, with his long, black hair tucked behind his head, blending in with the overall darkness and silence of the picture. A dark green pomegranate branch encircled the window edge, while the bright red pomegranate, as vivid as blood, was tightly held in Persephone's hand. Her expression was solemn, her eyebrows knitted together, her eyes gazing into the distance, her garlic-like red lips pursed together, and her hands unconsciously crossed over her chest, as if lost in long, concentrated contemplation. According to the myth, Persephone here is struggling with whether to accept Hades, the god of the underworld, and the pomegranates he offers. In the picture, we can infer that Rossetti's expression gives Persephone the right to "choose". The split pomegranate, with its bright red flesh exposed, is believed to carry a strong sexual implication of the physical transformation from a carefree and innocent girl to a mature woman. Apparently, the connection between Hades and Persephone was transformed by this iconic pomegranate, which was Hades' sexual invitation to her.

In the society of that time, women were always forced to submit, whether it was the arrangement of their marriage by their father or the so-called plundering of their bodies by their husbands, which meant that women were always in the position of an object. They had no right to choose and were forced to accept the change of their self-identity, from daughter to wife and then to mother, as if they were trapped in the cycle of object reincarnation. And the desire of women was regarded as a deadly poison. For the time, sexual desire seemed to be the exclusive privilege of men, and women were the contributors and victims of that privilege. Women showed numbness and distortion in their suppressed sexual desires. Even those who traded their bodies showed a greater desire to survive than to confront themselves. They thought it was shameful and disgraceful, and thus placed themselves in the position of an object. The root cause of this is the suppression of women's desires by men, or the legal restrictions on women's career choices, will not be explored in depth in this article. In contrast, the Persephone in Rossetti's works is subjective. She is no longer the young girl who is easily deceived by temptation, but a thoughtful mature woman who values her own feelings and thoughts and places her subjective experiences in the subject position. She struggled with her own situation and future, whether to accept the pomegranate and stay in the underworld, to accept her identity as a wife, or to give up the pomegranate and leave the

underworld. Here, though she is alone, she has the power to decide her own destiny. The painter's expression of the subject matter reflects his personal emotional tendencies. He left behind Persephone a transparent "exit", in contrast to the dark, cor-like gloom of the underworld, which may confirm Persephone's choice between freedom and power. Rossetti refused to portray Persephone as "passively accepting", and instead gave herself the right to choose whether to stay or leave.



Figure 7 Bernini 'Robbing persephone'

It is notable that the 17th-century Baroque artist Bernini also created works on the subject of Persephone. His sculpture "Robbing persephone" is a representative work of this theme. The contrast between it and Rossetti's depictions of Persephone reflects Rossetti's unique understanding of female identity and female recognition. Bernini's sculpture focuses on the moment when Hades forces Persephone into the underworld, with the tall and strong male body contrasting sharply with the delicate female body, highlighting Hades' strength and power and Persephone's helplessness and struggle. Such exaggerated depictions and grand narratives of the extreme disparity in strength between men and women highlight Persephone's passivity to the fullest. What Bernini presents is the story complex of Greek mythology itself, achieving a perfect artistic effect through dramatic exaggeration, and thus not pursuing the reflection on the inner portrayal of characters in the subject matter. Dante Rossetti, on the other hand, focuses on the character of Persephone herself, responding to the classic mythological plot with the image of a mature and wise woman.

2 The limitations of Rossetti's view of women

Although Dante Rossetti had an advanced understanding and unique insights into women, it cannot be ignored that he had a unique bird's-eye view as a male superior and the "upper class", and the complex connection between him and women also became the content of criticism from critics, who believed that his "feminist" thinking was not pure but rather consuming women. In addition to Elisabeth Hidalgo, his first wife, Rossetti also maintained a very close connection with his two other female models, both of whom served as sources of inspiration for him and were irreplaceable in his life. If Hidalgo was Rossetti's intoxication and longing for spiritual love, then Fanny Cornforth was the Muse of his carnal desires and sexual love. For the first ten years of their time together, Hidalgo refused to have sex with him. This physical and sexual rejection caused Rossetti to suffer, and as a result, his emotions became distorted. By chance, he met the prostitute Fanny Cornforth and quickly became a spiritual companion with physical communication. The presence of Fanny was complex for Rossetti. She was plump and flamboyant, holding a rose and having a provocative look. In the social context of the time, associating with Fanny meant Rossetti's class degradation. Rossetti was unable to obtain carnal desires from Hidalgo, and his loneliness and self-respect might have made him a hero to save the "downcast women", and there was a certain shift in his works towards this subject.

For example, his work "Found," which is Rossetti's only work depicting a phenomenon in Victorian society, shows a man meeting his former lover who has become a prostitute on a street corner, and he tries to pull the pale woman up to save her. Here we might think that Rossetti has placed himself in the image of the man, and the red-haired woman who plays the prostitute is undoubtedly Fanny Cornforth. Perhaps Rossetti's intention in creating this painting was to criticize the tragic phenomena that were prevalent in society at that time, to expose the extreme oppression of women under an unfair social order, and to express his sympathy and lament for the situation of women. But his status as a man in power also casts a shadow over this expression, whether it is out of pure emotional resonance with women or from a side



Figure 8 Dundin. Rossetti 'Found'

perspective, highlighting the "arrogance" of his own middle-class stance. In fact, Rossetti spent 30 years revising the painting but never managed to complete it, the art historian Henri Marini argues that such incompleteness is a reflection of Rossetti's inability to truly speak up for the underclass women in society or to take practical action for a real salvation.

It can be said that Rossetti's view of women is somewhat complex. His depictions of women are more or less about their own desires and needs, and he pursues rewards, love and eternity in them. But at the same time, he recognized the meaning and value of women's independence. He gave the women in his pictures the freedom of wisdom and choice, and returned the rights and desires that were equal to all "people" to the women he depicted, expressing a certain degree of support and affirmation in his own way in the prevailing social trend of feminism and the struggle for women's rights at that time.

3 Conclusion

Through the above on Dante, it can be concluded that the creation of artistic images and the artist's depiction of artistic images are inseparable from specific social backgrounds and ideological trends, as well as the mutual influence of emotions among specific groups of people. The feminist movement and ideological trend that emerged in 19th-century British society gave rise to Rossetti's unique "anti-mainstream" female image, which, while presenting his unique thoughts on the individual existence of women, also demonstrated that the torrent of social progress and ideological change would to a large extent influence the artistic creation of that era. Artistic creation, in turn, can pass on its unique ideas to the viewer and to future generations. The female figures and their views on women in Rossetti's paintings well reflect the progress and victory of feminist thought in art. While creating complex female figures with autonomous consciousness and autonomous thinking, it also has a profound influence and inspiration on feminist art and the creation of female artists in later generations.

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