

MA Thesis Proposal Form

Department of English & Comparative Literature
San Jose State University

Candidate's Name: Name

Thesis Topic/Title: "Honourable Freedom": Female Subjectivity and the Problem of Time in the Poetry of Christina Rossetti

Thesis Director: Dr. X

Second Reader: Dr. X

Third Reader: Dr. X

Brief Description:

In this thesis, I will explore the thematic recurrence of time in the poetry of Christina Rossetti, and I will examine how it is used to construct the female subject. I will argue that Rossetti, responding to the cultural discourse of time in the Victorian era, depicts gendered temporalities: a transcendent time aligned with nature and the feminine; and a material time aligned with waste and the masculine. In close-readings of Rossetti's poetry, I will show how the invasion of the male temporal order threatens female subjectivity, and that in her poetry, full female selfhood is only possible outside of this male temporality. I will also demonstrate how Rossetti enacts these temporal concepts poetically in the "lyric time" of her poetry, thereby creating a textual time and space for the female subject. My project will examine three types of female subjects in Rossetti's poetry: the "fallen woman," the speaking female corpse, and the "unnamed lady" of the sonnet tradition.

MA Coordinator _____

Thesis Director _____

Approved by the Graduate Committee _____

MA Thesis Proposal

Name:

Semester:

“Honorable Freedom”: Female Subjectivity and the Problem of Time in the Poetry of Christina Rossetti

In her well-known poem, “In an Artist’s Studio,” Rossetti writes about a female model as she is idealized and represented by a male artist. The relationship between the artist and his subject is one of almost vampiric consumption: as “He feeds upon her face by day and night” (l.9), she is mute and confined in the artist’s “same one meaning, neither more or less” (l. 8). The artist’s idealization of his subject obscures her reality, erasing the labor of her “waiting” and any inharmonious “sorrow” she may feel (l. 12). In the sonnet’s closing lines, Rossetti summarizes the female subject’s nonexistence in the masculine realm with a grammatical sleight-of-hand.

According to Rossetti, the artist has painted the model

Not as she *is*, but *was* when hope shone bright;

Not as she *is*, but *as* she fills his dream. (ll. 13-14) (my emphasis)

In line 13, the distinction Rossetti draws between the female model and her representation is temporal: as an object within the masculine realm of the painting, the model exists in a different verb tense than she does as the subject of Rossetti’s poem. Line 14 repeats the previous line with a difference: Rossetti removes the verb “was” and replaces it with the preposition “as.” In doing so she suggests that, in the masculine space of representation, the model is stripped of her essence, becoming only a means of relating the artist to his dream. The female subject, Rossetti suggests in this poem, cannot speak nor exist in the time and space of the masculine artistic tradition. That the

poem takes the form of a Petrarchan sonnet, which by convention demands both the absence and idealization of the female, suggests that the masculine artistic tradition extends to poetic tradition in Rossetti's mind, and she is commenting reflexively on the difficulty of her own poetic practice. Rossetti's central concerns in "In the Artist's Studio" are precisely those that I wish to investigate in my project researching her poetry: female subjectivity, time, and poetics in a world authored by men. I will explore the thematic recurrence of time in her poetry, and I will examine how it is used to construct the female subject. I will argue that Rossetti depicts gendered temporalities: a transcendent time aligned with nature and the feminine; and a material time aligned with waste and the masculine. I will show how the invasion of the male temporal order threatens female subjectivity in Rossetti's poetry, and that in her poetry, full female self-hood is only possible outside of this male temporality. I will also demonstrate how Rossetti enacts these temporal concepts poetically in the "lyric time" of her poetry, thereby creating a time and space for the female subject. My project will examine three types of female subjects in Rossetti's poetry: the "fallen woman," the speaking female corpse, and the "unnamed lady" of the sonnet tradition. In exploring time as a theme in Rossetti's poetry, I will situate her concept of time in the temporally-obsessed culture of the mid- to late 19th century. Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, Darwin's theory of evolution, German biblical criticism, and discoveries in archaeology and anthropology throughout the period overturned its understanding of man's origins and dwarfed his importance in "the immensity of past time" (Lyell, qtd. in Gilmour 26). As Robin Gilmour states, the Victorians were "fascinated by time because they were conscious of being its victims"; a divinely ordered world became unmoored by new concepts of time (25). In *The Triumph of Time* (1966), Jerome Buckley traces concepts of progress, decadence, history, and eternity in Victorian scientific, religious, and historical discourses, drawing a distinction between "public time,"

society's attitudes as a living, changing whole, and "private time," the subjective experience of the individual. Buckley explores how the concepts of public and private time were debated and negotiated in the era's poetry, particularly that of Arnold, Browning, Tennyson, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Swinburne.

Unfortunately, Buckley's cultural history does not consider the influence of gender in shaping the perception of time. He would hardly be expected to: Christina Rossetti is not discussed, and but for a passing reference to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, no female poets are included in his study. Patricia Murphy's *Time is of the Essence* addresses this question of time and gender directly by analyzing depictions of time in relation to the "New Woman" in late Victorian literature. Murphy argues that in the "chronocentric" literature of this period, time is a "vehicle for reifying a patriarchal order... that naturalized repressive definitions of female subjectivity" (2). My project will consider Christina Rossetti's treatment of time in conversation with those of her contemporaries in Buckley's discussion, and it will integrate Murphy's insights on the gendered implications of time missing from Buckley's analysis.

Though she had long evaded scholarly interest with the seeming piety, conservatism, and simplicity of her verse, attention to Rossetti's poetics was revived by scholarship in the 1970s. Her representation of gender roles and gender imbalances, religious and social themes, motifs of sisterhood, and non-normative sexuality provided the basis for revised readings of her work. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) find Rossetti's recurrent imagery of enclosure and the spare quality of her poetry characteristic of an "aesthetics of renunciation": self-abnegation and death in place of self-expression in a patriarchal culture. While Gilbert and Gubar mourn the artistic potential Rossetti necessarily sacrificed (as they read her life)

in submitting to the demands of life as a Christian woman, Antony Harrison celebrates her poetry's formal experimentation, semiotic play, and prosodic sophistication, reframing her as a virtuosic craftswoman (40-41). Harrison argues that Rossetti employs a "poetics of conciseness," a deliberate eschewing of syntactic details and references in order to invoke the transcendental, inviting the reader to "focus on the universal rather than the personal" (42). Isobel Armstrong's expressive theory of Victorian women's poetry revises Gilbert and Gubar and accommodates Harrison's view. Armstrong writes:

...[S]ince the representational symbol is both the *means* of expression and the *form* of its repression, *expression* and *repression*, although in conflict with one another, become interdependent. They constitute one another, so that expression is predicated upon repression. The overflow of secret and hidden feeling creates the barriers which bind and limit it, while the limits enable the overflow of feeling. (341)

For Armstrong, in place of the "aesthetics of renunciation" is the "aesthetics of the secret" – expression through withholding. Commenting on Rossetti's poetry and its secretiveness, Armstrong observes that its "seeming sourcelessness" and "contextlessness of lyric" are intentional and a strategic response to the problematic model of the feminine (339). My project will engage with Harrison's and Armstrong's assessments by examining how Rossetti's representation of time creates this "seeming contextlessness." I will consider how this strategy authorizes her voice as a female poet and enables her to represent female subjectivity. ***

Outline

I plan to organize my project into three parts, one for each type of female subject in Rossetti's poetry. I will briefly sketch what I plan to discuss in each section:

I. Time and the Body: Rossetti's "Fallen Woman" Poems

In this section, I will examine the way Rossetti represents the "Fallen Woman" as the consequence of being trapped within the masculine temporal order. In a discussion of Tess D'Urberville, Patricia Murphy describes how Tess is controlled within the patriarchal history as a "somatic pawn who can participate in that history only marginally" (74). In other words, Tess is temporally defined only through the materiality of the female body. Similarly, in Rossetti's "Fallen Women" poems such as "An Apple-Gathering," "A Triad," and "Cousin Kate," the situation of courtship presents a situation that, as Rossetti observes, values women only for their physical appearance: in the masculine temporal order, youth and beauty become commodified. Accordingly, Rossetti uses the language of consumption and waste in relating what happens to her female subjects, a language that shifts the moral blame to the consumer.

My analysis in this section will center on a reading of time in Rossetti's "Goblin Market," a poem which allegorizes the fallen woman and (progressively) imagines her salvation. In this "contextless" fairy-tale setting, the invasion of linear, masculine time is manifest bodily in Laura's accelerated aging and physical listlessness after tasting the goblin fruit. Lizzie is able to save her sister by patiently enduring the assault of the goblin men without yielding to their temptation (i.e., she symbolically remains in her own time). Through her sister's heroism, Laura escapes the male temporal order, and her aging as a result of the goblin assault is reversed. However, the poem does not end with Laura's salvation by her sister. I will further explore how Rossetti enacts the idea of her poetry's potential to create an eternal space of female temporality with the narrative addition of an epilogue where the tale of Goblin Market is told and retold an undetermined "Days, weeks, months, years" after the main narrative (ll. 543-544).

II. Out of time: Rossetti's Speaking Corpses

In this section, I would like to explore a strategy of staging that Rossetti uses to circumvent time and its gendered and ideological implications: death. While critics in the earlier part of the 20th century referred to the frequent presence of death and dead speakers in Rossetti's poems as typical of a "morbid strain" in her poetry, feminist and newhistoricist theories enabled recent scholars to be able to read them as ironic counterdiscourse. In these poems, Susan Conley suggests, "death becomes both an indictment of life and the moment of revenge on oppression, an opportunity, paradoxically, for the dead woman to exercise power and control" (265). I will analyze her poems "After Death," "At Home," "Remember," and "Song," and examine the ideological destabilization of Rossetti's female subjects who are unfettered – or nearly so – by material time.

III. *Monna Innominata*

Scholars studying the efflorescence of the sonnet sequence in the late 19th century have cited the form's inherent conflict between the parts and the whole – i.e., the individual sonnet and the entire sequence – and its long literary tradition in its appeal to writers looking to explore historically self-conscious selfhood within the Victorian social order. Moreover, the sonnet sequence's tension between momentary closure and narrative momentum provides a natural literary vehicle for the Victorian fascination with time. In this chapter, I will consider the relationship between temporality, female subjectivity, and form in the sonnet sequence by analyzing Rossetti's "Sonnet of Sonnets" *Monna Innominata*, Rossetti's recovery of the "unnamed lady" of the amatory sonnet sequence tradition. I will read *Monna Innominata* within the context of the sonnet sequence tradition, stretching from Dante and Petrarch to more contemporary examples, such as her brother's

sonnet sequence, *The House of Life*, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets of the Portuguese*. I will argue that Christina Rossetti's sonnet sequence subverts the tradition and constructs a distinctly *individual* female poetic subject by structurally and rhetorically resisting a sequential, narrative reading. In the self-reflexive manner of the sonnet and, indeed, much of Rossetti's poetry, the individual poems assert their autonomy by resisting the imposed order of the macro-sonnet. Finally, I will consider time as it is thematized within the sequence and its implications in constructing female subjectivity. In *Monna Innominata*, Rossetti aligns the celibate female individual with the notion of transcendent, infinite time in contrast to with material, finite time. In disrupting this masculine temporal order, Rossetti creates a space for the celibate female, alone but "no less full of feeling" (Preface to *Monna Innominata*).

While the reductive and inaccurate image of Christina Rossetti as a pious, reclusive spinster has been largely revised by the work of recent scholars, there seems to remain a reluctance to bring her into conversation with the cultural discourse of time in the late 19th century. This is perhaps due to the fact of her piety: the Victorian fascination with time and its close association with the "Crisis of Belief" may somehow suggest that only secular responses are valid responses. However, as I will show in my study, which I believe to be the first of its kind, Rossetti thought about time deeply. Through its manipulation in the content and form of her poetry, Rossetti was able to represent female subjectivities not sanctioned by the Victorian social order – fallen women, dead women, celibate women, and women poets.

Annotated Bibliography

Armstrong, Isobel. *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*. Routledge, 1993.

In her formidable survey of Victorian poetry, Armstrong argues that the Victorians grappled with problems of the subject, representation, and language principally in the form of the “double poem,” poetry that at once expressed and analyzed, constructed and deconstructed, feelings and beliefs. Armstrong demonstrates the subversive political currents underlying the work of female poets such as Christina Rossetti, for whom language was both a means of expression and repression.

Billone, Amy Christine. *Little Songs: Women, Silence, and the Nineteenth-Century Sonnet*. The Ohio State U, 2007.

Billone examines the relationship between lyric poetry and silence in women’s sonnets from the 19th century, arguing that the form’s restrictiveness “helped to make inexpressibility visible” (156). She places Christina Rossetti in this tradition and demonstrates in a close-reading of *Monna Innominata* that, with masculine theories of language and the self (i.e., the sublime) inaccessible to her, Rossetti instead drew upon the “music of silence” for her voice.

Buckley, Jerome Hamilton. *The Triumph of Time: A Study of the Victorian Concepts of Time, History, Progress, and Decadence*. Harvard UP, 1966.

Buckley places the Victorians' "unprecedented" sense of time within historical, scientific, technological, and religious contexts, tracing the conflict and interplay of "public," objective time, with "private," subjective time in the period's concepts of history, progress, and decline.

Conley, Susan. "Rossetti's Cold Women: Irony and Liminal Fantasy in the Death Lyrics." *The Culture of Christina Rossetti: Female Poetics and Victorian Contexts*, edited by Mary Arseneau, Antony H. Harrison, and Lorraine J. Kooistra, Ohio UP, 1999, pp. 260-284.

Conley argues that the speakers in Christina Rossetti's death poems enjoy a "fantasy of power" inaccessible to them in life, providing a "bitter" commentary on Victorian gender politics (262).

D'Amico, Diane. *Christina Rossetti: Faith, Gender, and Time*. Louisiana State UP, 1999.

D'Amico reads Rossetti's poetry through her religious prose, bringing a nuanced and specific understanding of how Rossetti's Anglo-Catholic faith was reflected in her work. D'Amico argues that Rossetti's faith, gender, and poetic vocation, considered within the historical context of the Victorian era, were inextricably woven and essential to understanding her work.

Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd edition, Yale Nota Bene, 2000.

Gilbert and Gubar discuss the theme of renunciation in Rossetti's work. Using psychoanalytic theory and the context of 19th century literary tradition, they read *Goblin*

Market as an allegory of sexual temptation and poetic ambition and the subsequent renunciation of both.

Gilmour, Robin. *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1830-1890*. Longman, 1993.

Gilmour provides an intellectual and cultural context for Victorian literature, focusing on science, religion, politics, and art. His book begins with a discussion of the contemporary preoccupation with time, which, as Gilmour shows, presides and comes to define the period.

Harrison, Antony H. *Christina Rossetti in Context*. The University of North Carolina P, 1988.

Harrison provides a broad overview of Christina Rossetti's work. He examines the tension between the aesthetic and religious impulses in Rossetti's poetry, situating it within the Pre-Raphaelite movement, Romanticism, and Anglo-Catholicism.

Holmes, John. *Dante Rossetti and the Late Victorian Sonnet Sequence: Sexuality, Belief, and the Self*. Ashgate, 2005.

Holmes studies how sonnet writers of the late 19th century used the sonnet sequence to explore complex and pressing questions of selfhood, religious belief and doubt, and sexual and national identity. Holmes reads Christina Rossetti's sonnet sequences *Monna Innominata* and *Later Life* as Christian rebukes of her brother Gabriel's sonnet sequence *The House of Life* and its spiritualization of sexual love.

Morgan, Monique R. *Narrative Means, Lyric Ends: Temporality in the Nineteenth-Century British*

Long Poem. The Ohio State UP, 2009.

Morgan studies the generic experimentation in the novel-length narrative poems of the 19th century. While her study does not include Christina Rossetti's poetry, her analysis of the "productive" tension between the lyrical and narrative modes in the era will help me to situate my own analysis historically (4).

Murphy, Patricia. *Time is of the Essence: Temporality, Gender, and the New Woman*. State U of New York P, 2001.

Murphy argues that the cultural construction of time in the late 19th century, grounded in gendered notions of history, progress, religion, and science, served as a powerful vehicle for reifying boundaries between masculinity and femininity.

Rossetti, Christina. *Christina Rossetti: The Complete Poems*. Edited by Rebecca W. Crump, Penguin Classics, 2001.

Rossetti's complete poems, edited by Rebecca W. Crump, are presented in this edition with contextual and composition notes.

Wagner, Jennifer Ann. *A Moment's Monument: Revisionary Poetics and the Nineteenth-Century English Sonnet*. Associate UP, 1996.

Although she does not include Christina Rossetti (nor any other female poets) in her study, Wagner's discussion of the "revisionary poetics" of the 19th century sonnet pioneered by

Wordsworth provides a historical and literary context for exploring how this poetic form was used to engage with notions of temporality and historicity.

Works to be Consulted

Arseneau, Mary, Antony H. Harrison, and Lorraine J. Kooistra, editors. *The Culture of Christina Rossetti: Female Poetics and Victorian Contexts*. Ohio UP, 1999.

Crump, Rebecca W. *Christina Rossetti: A Reference Guide*. G.K. Hall, 1976.

Ferguson, Trish. *Victorian Time: Technologies, Standardizations, Catastrophes*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Jamison, Anne E. *Poetics en Passant: Redefining the Relationship Between Victorian and Modern Poetry*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Kern, Stephen. *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880-1918*. Harvard UP, 1983.

Marsh, Jan. *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography*. Jonathan Cape, 1994.

Palazzo, Lynda. *Christina Rossetti's Feminist Theology*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.