



## THE SEDUCTIVE FEMININE BEAUTY IN DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI'S SONNET "LILITH" AND PAINTING LADY LILITH<sup>1</sup>

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI'NİN "LILITH" ADLI SONESİNDE VE LADY LILITH ADLI TABLOSUNDA BAŞTAN ÇIKARICI KADIN GÜZELLİĞİ

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### Abstract

The Pre-Raphaelite movement was established in 1848 not only as a rebellion against the principles in art of the Royal Academy but also as a reaction to the values of the Victorian Age. Drawing heavily from Dante Gabriel Rossetti's depiction of the sexually attractive and seductive female character as a femme fatale, all other members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood – such as Victorian poets, painters, designers and illustrators – began portraying female figures in their works as seductive femme fatales, which was indeed in total contrast with the Victorian idea of woman as "the angel in the house." Hence, especially, in poetry and painting, female beauty and sexual yearning had a significant place. Given that, the leading Victorian poet-painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), a vehement founding member of the Brotherhood, used female figures extensively, and thereby the concept of feminine beauty dominated his poems and paintings. Especially, through his widespread use of unconventional female figures like fallen women and prostitutes, Rossetti manifested his explicit opposition to the Victorian ideals. Furthermore, by emphasising seductive feminine beauty in his works, he tried to break the sexual taboos in Victorian poetry and art. Therefore, he was marginalised in the Victorian Age; yet still, he became the best representative of art for art's sake movement. Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to examine the depiction of women both in Rossetti's sonnet "Lilith" and painting Lady Lilith with reference to his ballad "Eden Bower." Moreover, this paper analyses how Rossetti introduces his femme fatale figure, and hence, concludes that through his unconventional portrayal of woman and her beauty, Rossetti brings a new insight not only to the depiction of women in Victorian poetry and art but also to the condition of women in the Victorian Period in general.

### Öz

Ön-Raffaellocu akım sadece kraliyet akademisinin ilkelerine isyan olarak değil aynı zamanda Viktorya dönemi değerlerine karşı çıkan bir akım olarak 1848'de kurulmuştur. Dante Gabriel Rossetti'nin yoldan çıkmış kadın gibi cinsel açıdan çekici ve baştan çıkarıcı kadın karakterinin tasvirinden büyük ölçüde etkilenen- Viktorya dönemi şairleri, ressam, tasarımcıları ve çizimcileri gibi - Ön-Raffaellocular adlı topluluğun tüm diğer üyeleri, baştan çıkarıcı kadınları eserlerinde ortaya koymaya başlamışlardır ki bu figürler Viktorya döneminin kadının "evdeki melek" olduğu fikrine tamamen ters düşmüştür. Bu yüzden, özellikle şiir ve resimde kadın güzelliği ve cinsel istek önemli yer tutar. Ön-Raffaellocular adlı topluluğun başlıca kurucusu ve Viktorya dönemine damgasını vuran İngiliz şair ve ressam Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828- 1882) eserlerinde kadın figürlerini yoğun bir şekilde kullanmıştır ve bu yüzden kadın güzelliği kavramı şiirlerine ve resimlerine hâkim olmuştur. Özellikle, geleneklere uymayan yoldan çıkmış kadınları ve fahişe figürlerini yaygın bir şekilde kullanarak, Rossetti Viktorya dönemi ideallerine açık bir şekilde karşı çıktığını göstermiştir. Dahası, Rossetti eserlerinde baştan çıkarıcı kadın güzelliğine vurgu yaparak, Viktorya dönemi şiirindeki ve sanatındaki cinsel tabuyu yıkmaya çalışmıştır. Bundan dolayı, Rossetti Viktorya döneminde dışlanmış; ama yine de sanat sanat içindir akımının en iyi temsilcisi olmayı başarmıştır. Bu bağlamda, bu makalenin temel amacı Rossetti'nin "Lilith" adlı Sonesi ve Lady Lilith adlı tablosunda kadın tasvirini Rossetti'nin baladı "Eden Bower"a referanslar vererek incelemektir. Ayrıca, bu makalede Rossetti'nin baştan çıkarıcı kadın figürünü nasıl ortaya çıkardığı analiz edilecektir ve böylelikle, Rossetti'nin kadın ve kadın güzelliğine ilişkin alışılmadık tasviri sayesinde, kendisinin yalnızca Viktorya Dönemi şiiri ve sanatındaki kadın betimlemesine değil, aynı zamanda Viktorya Dönemi'ndeki kadınların genel durumuna da yeni bir bakış açısı getirdiği sonucuna varılacaktır.

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## Introduction

The Victorian Period, which can be regarded as a period of great dramatic change due to the developments in each and every thing ranging from advances in medicine and science to technology, sheds light on the events in the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901). As her reign lasted over sixty three years, Victorian England witnessed great expansion of power, wealth, cultural and social developments as well as the abundance of versatile writers; and hence, it embodied lots of distinguishing characteristics. It can be claimed that one of them, even the most conspicuous one, is the Pre-Raphaelite movement as various changes have been pitched by its members in relation to the condition of women in art and society. Although Victorian society was governed by a female ruler, the status of women did not change, and women were not able to have equal rights with men as Queen Victoria, who accepted her secondary status both in family and society, was always loyal to her husband and children. Indeed, throughout centuries, as in the nineteenth century, women have been expected to be submissive, obedient, silent, and virtuous. In the same fashion, they were expected to preserve themselves for marriage; and after marriage, they were to devote themselves to their husbands and children. In other words, Victorian women, who were explicitly obliged to be submissive to patriarchy, were expected to be “The Angel in the House”<sup>2</sup>. For that reason, especially due to their roles as good wives and good mothers, their lives were restricted to domestic sphere, in which they had many household responsibilities, such as taking care of the cooking, cleaning, and child rearing, among many others. Because of these domestic roles attributed to them by society, women were exempt from indulging in art and poetry, let alone even the basic requirements of education. More specifically, although there were numerous improvements under the law in relation to the condition of women in society, marriage, and moral areas, the place of Victorian women was still secondary, and they were, thus, not allowed to deviate from the strict principles of the Victorian idea of womanhood. Victorian writers like Robert Browning (1812-1889) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), who were deeply concerned with the subordinate status of women, decided to present women from a different perspective in their works. In this regard, especially the members of the Pre-Raphaelite movement presented

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<sup>2</sup> The title of Coventry Patmore’s poem “The Angel in the House” (1854) is also used to define the ideal woman in Victorian period.

women's evil side instead of their moral side which can be regarded as a shocking innovation in Victorian art and poetry.

### **The Pre-Raphaelite Movement: A Key Turning Point in English Poetry and Painting**

As a literary and artistic creation, the term Pre-Raphaelite movement has been used interchangeably as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and Pre-Raphaelitism. Founded in 1848 by William Holman Hunt (1827-1910), Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), and John Everett Millais (1829-1896), the Pre-Raphaelite movement, which explored medieval, religious, and moral subjects in a non-academic manner, brought about a revolution in English poetry and painting in that it rejected the approaches taught in English Arts Academy where the Italian painter Raffaello's light and composition techniques were followed. Moreover, the Pre-Raphaelites supported the relationship between painting and poetry by emphasising the inherent stories of each painting. In this respect, William Evan Fredeman puts forward that "*the artistic principles, the techniques, the content, and the underlying spirit or tone*", which were carried out in the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites, "*were absorbed into a literary context*" as the "*Pre-Raphaelite art was almost entirely a 'narrative' or 'literary' phenomenon*" (1956, para. 5). In other words, the Pre-Raphaelite art emphasised the narrative content rather than pure form and technique. It is undeniable that Dante Gabriel Rossetti presented the literary influence of the Pre-Raphaelite movement in his poems and painting. As Mary Bennett suggests, "*[t]he most cultivated of the circle, [the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood] he provided the imaginative enthusiasm*", and he, thus, "*pursued the 'mediaeval' and romantic ideals*" (1988, p. 167) in his work. Accomplished as a poet and artist, Rossetti (1828-1882) was born in London as the eldest son of the Italian scholar Gabriele Rossetti and his wife Frances Polidori. It can be assumed that his family background, personal life, the places where he studied and lived gave shape to both his poetry and painting. For example, his sister Christina Rossetti (1830-1894), a distinguished woman poet, and his brother William Rossetti (1829-1919), a biographer, helped Rossetti in his poetic and artistic career. Furthermore, Rossetti "*combined extensive reading among the poets with designing highly-charged romantic illustrations and art training at Sass's School, 1841-4*" (Bennett, 1988, p. 167), and then he entered the Royal Academy Schools as a student in 1845. After a while he started questioning the rules of the Royal Academy and the dominant Victorian culture in relation to their approach to art. More specifically, in

his works he highlighted his critique of strict morality, religion, and didacticism of the Victorian period.

### **The Transformation of the Portrayal of Female Figures in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Poetry and Painting**

As a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Rossetti tried to create an aesthetic world in which his concern was beauty rather than usefulness or didacticism. At this juncture, as David Arthur Sonstroem argues, “*some 95% of his poems and 98% of his paintings and drawings treat love and feminine beauty*” (1970, s. 3). He advocated the representation of sexuality in each branch of arts. Therefore, he, who returned to oil painting in 1859, mostly dealt with “*idealised subjects of beautiful women in a richly sensuous style heralding the Aesthetic movement, Art Nouveau and the Symbolists*” (Bennett, 1988, p. 167). Obviously, he presented just the stark opposite of the ideals of the Victorian Age, including strict morals. Furthermore, as Özlem Uzundemir propounds, by associating the seductive feminine beauty with the aesthetic values of the Victorian art, Rossetti, in fact, aimed to criticise “*the conservative understanding of the Victorian art that excludes the representation of sexuality in art*”<sup>3</sup> (2010, p. 71). For that reason he used unconventional female figures in his works and presented their tempting beauty instead of dealing with women who have been expected to be virtuous and submissive daughters and wives.

In this regard, Rossetti's marginal female figures share certain common characteristics such as having straight noses, sensuous red lips, prominent jawlines, long necks, voluminous hair, and powerful physical features. In her poem entitled “*In an Artist's Studio,*” Christina Rossetti criticises Gabriel's women figures by saying that “*One face looks out from all his canvases, / One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans*” (2008, p. 71, 1-2). Yet indeed he wants to describe various characteristics in his paintings and the representation of this particular type of women, thus, has differences in terms of the periods in which Rossetti painted them. In brief, Sonstroem asserts that

at different times in his career Rossetti emphasized different fantasies. For example, the Madonna predominates at first; in 1853 and for a while thereafter, the sinful woman; about 1860, the victimized woman;

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<sup>3</sup> The translation from Uzundemir's book *İmgeyi Konuşturmak: İngiliz Yazınında Görsel Sanatlar* into English belongs to the author.

in the mid-1860's, the femme fatale; and later something of a combination of Madonna and femme fatale (1970, p. 4).

In effect, in the beginning of his career he focused on the significant religious icons such as Madonna, a common representation of Virgin Mary. However, his representation of women, to a great extent, changed in relation to his own experiences with women. More specifically, in 1852 Rossetti met Elizabeth Siddal, who became his main model, and in 1860 they married. Although Rossetti tried to remain devoted to his wife during the first years of their marriage, he then had a secret affair with Fanny Cornforth (1835-1909) who was a beautiful model and a former prostitute. Becoming Rossetti's mistress, Cornforth, undoubtedly, had a devastating influence on his marriage. After Siddal's death from an overdose of laudanum in 1862, Cornforth became his model. However, Rossetti felt responsible for Siddal's death and blamed Cornforth, who was depicted by Rossetti as a seductive woman like Lady Lilith, of seducing himself. Therefore, while painting his *Lady Lilith*, Rossetti used his mistress Cornforth as his model. Yet, in 1872 he repainted his painting by using Alexa Wilding's face instead of Cornforth's. After ending his affair with Cornforth, he had an illicit love affair with Jane Morris who was his friend William Morris's wife. Accordingly, as pointed out by Kate Moller, the earlier religious figures and themes in Rossetti's poetry and painting like "spiritual salvation through love" replaced "[t]hemes like prostitution and the femme fatale" (2004, para. 24). In other words, in relation to his troubled affairs with women, his representation of the female characters has changed drastically, and in this change, the transition of the portrayal of the female figures from innocent to evil is clear.

In this respect, in his long sonnet sequence *The House of Life*, Rossetti used the title "Soul's Beauty" to express his female figures, who have the spiritual beauty, while he depicts physical feminine beauty with the term "Body's Beauty." The two sonnets, "Soul's Beauty" and "Body's Beauty," were written to accompany the paintings *Sibylla Palmifera* (1864-1870) and *Lady Lilith* (1864-1872), which represented "them as types of ideal and sensual beauty" (Kastan, 2006, p. 417). The sonnet "Body's Beauty," which was published in 1868, was initially called "Lilith." It shows that his sonnet "Lilith" is associated with his painting *Lady Lilith* which was painted in 1864, and amended by Rossetti in 1872. Rossetti wrote to Frederick Leyland, who wanted to purchase his painting, as follows:

As you continue to express a wish to have a good picture of mine, I write you word of another I have now begun, which will be one of my best. The picture represents a lady combing her hair. It is the same size as *Palmifera* [which represents the soul's beauty] – 36 x 31 inches, and will be full of material, – a landscape seen in the background. Its color chiefly white and silver, with a great mass of golden hair (Wildman, 2004, p. 186).

Here, Rossetti describes his painting *Lady Lilith* as one of the best paintings that he has painted. Moreover, in 1869, he published his ballad “Eden Bower” which is also related to his painting. Clearly, in his poems “Lilith,” “Eden Bower,” and the painting *Lady Lilith*, which were published in the mid-1960s, Rossetti presents the seductive beauty of a woman through his *femme fatale* figures. In order to portray the beautiful female figures, Rossetti borrows from the classical mythology. This is because, in all these works, Rossetti uses the Jewish mythical figure Lilith by reinterpreting it in accord with glimmers of his own experiences. According to the Jewish tradition, Lilith, “a seductress and demon woman who gave birth only to devils and who wanted equal rights in everything” (Faxon, 1989, p. 203) was Adam’s first wife, and was created long before Eve. However, she was banished from the Garden of Eden when she refused to obey him. As David Leeming states, Lilith “was too arrogant to lie in the passive position under Adam and chose to leave her husband when he demanded that she do so, thereby becoming the first feminist rebel” (2005, p. 239). After Lilith flew away from Adam, she turned into a demon figure, the sensual snake-woman, because she, in a sense, became the symbol of disobedience as a queen of demons. Therefore, “[i]n Jewish popular etymology” (2007, p. 142), as Eduardo Kac asserts, Lilith means “devil of the night” or “the female devil”. Moreover, in his translation of *Faust*, Rossetti describes Lilith as follows:

Hold thou thy heart against her shining hair,  
 If, by thy fate, she spreads it once for thee;  
 For, when she nets a young man in that snare,  
 So twines she him he never may be free (1970, qtd. in Greene, p. 129).

Here, it can be claimed that through Lilith, Rossetti displays his own mythical version of the appearance of evil for the first time. In this vein, Alice Mills assumes that Lilith “is a female winged night demon [associated with sex], who preys on men, endangers women in childbirth, and strangles children” (2003, p. 335).

### **Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Painting *Lady Lilith***

In relation to the origins of Lilith as a mythical figure, it is evident that Rossetti presents “*beautiful, sexually inviting (or intimidating) women,*” who can be accepted as the representation of “*the fallen woman and the femme fatale*” (Griffiths, 1997, p. 159). Accordingly, his painting *Lady Lilith* illustrates a young woman sitting on a chair and holding a mirror in her left hand, which is a common image used by Rossetti in his paintings. At first glance, it can be thought that she is in her bedroom. Yet, there is an ambiguity in the setting of the painting which suggests either/both indoors or/and outdoors. At first view, it is unclear whether there is a window or a mirror in the upper left corner of the painting. The reflection of the candles and a branch of poppy and white rose indicate that it is a mirror. However, on the other hand, in the mirror there is a reflection of a forest rather than a bedroom, which manifestly presents an exterior woodland scene suggesting Eden, which is actually Lilith's first home. According to Walter Pater, the obscurity between mirror and window, or in much the same way, between interior and exterior is one of the characteristics of “aesthetic” art (1986, p. 209). As Pater further reiterates, naturalistic scene generally appears in such aesthetic art, which can be described especially in relation to this painting as an “*insanity of realism*” (1986, p. 209). Additionally, J. Hillis Miller remarks that the obscurity between interior and exterior presented through mirror images is displayed in order to give the reflection of “*one's own face in the mirror*” (1991, p. 338). Indeed, in Pre-Raphaelite movement, besides the setting, the figure and landscape are equally important. Therefore, Pre-Raphaelites pay attention to every detail to make it more realistic. In this regard, the symbolism of flowers is remarkable in their poetry and painting as they are fascinated by the “*language of flowers*” (Gordon, 1977, p. 108-109). Like other Pre-Raphaelites, Rossetti, who was influenced by the development of flower symbolism especially in the paintings of the nineteenth century, believed in the distinctive meanings of flowers and used the traditional iconography of flowers as well as his private flower symbolism to create his own associations. In this respect, in his painting *Lady Lilith*, Rossetti uses flower symbolism and Lilith is, thus, surrounded by red poppies and white roses which are the symbols of death and sensual love, or more explicitly, sexuality. In the context of Jewish legend, “*all roses in paradise were white at first, until Eve kissed one because of its great beauty, and all of the roses blushed red with the compliment*” (Smith, 1978, p. 97). As Sarah Hamilton Phelps Smith further states, “*since Lilith was Adam's wife before Eve, the roses in her Eden therefore would be white*” (1978, p. 97). Hence, in the painting she is surrounded by white flowers.

Evidently, the flowers which surround her increase the ambiguity of the setting because she seems to be sitting outside on her own. From another point, the background scene of the painting is dark while the reflection in the mirror introduces daylight. That is, there is a link between death and life.

Given that, the painting *Lady Lilith* mainly focuses on Lady Lilith herself and her seductive beauty through her voluminous hair. She combs out her long, waving and golden hair, which presents sensual absorption. As Algernon Charles Swinburne posits, Lilith, the self-absorbed figure of beauty,

charms and draws down the souls of men by pure force of absorption, in no wise willful or malignant; outside herself she cannot live, she cannot even see: and because of this she attracts and subdues all men at once in body and in spirit (2004, p. 372).

Clearly, she admires herself, and is satisfied with herself by looking at the mirror in her hand. She does not make eye contact with any man. The expression on her face is glassy and her gaze is fixed at her mirror. Hence, in this way, she presents narcissistic contemplation of herself. However, on the other hand, Miller claims that “*Lilith’s subtle contemplation of herself weaves a net, and behind the net there is a gulf*” into which “*the men she fascinates will fall*” (1991, p. 334). This gulf, for Miller, is “*orchard pit’ which was Rossetti’s constant dream, that ugly ditch beside the apple tree with the Lilith or Siren figure in the crotch of its branches, offering a fatal apple and a fatal kiss*” (1991, p. 334).

Unlike the conventional Victorian woman, Lady Lilith wears not a corset; but a white nightdress, which reveals her pale shoulders, long neck and breasts. Besides the white nightgown, a coronet of white flowers lies in her lap. Although the colour white stands for purity, her red lips, her red bracelet and red flower in the vase at her side, have sexual connotations, which reveal her passion. In other words, there is a relationship between them in that they bring her feminine side into the forefront. In order to influence men, Lady Lilith displays her beauty. It is clear that she is suitable for the Pre-Raphaelite depiction of the *femme fatale* with her strong chin, red lips and golden hair. On the toilet table, which is surrounded by pink flowers, there is a pink jar in the form of a heart surmounted by a crown. As Smith argues, Rossetti uses the colour pink on the toilet table “*to reflect the skin tones and emphasize the metaphor between flower and woman*” (1978, p. 97).



### Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Sonnet "Lilith"

As Rossetti's "Body's Beauty" or "Lilith," the sonnet 78 of *The House of Life*, was written to accompany his painting *Lady Lilith*, the sonnet was written after the painting was produced. Thus, it is evident that Lilith also becomes the symbol of his sonnet in which she is portrayed as a dangerous seductress:

Of Adam's first wife, Lilith, it is told  
 (The witch he loved before the gift of Eve,)
   
That, ere the snake's, her sweet tongue could deceive,  
 And her enchanted hair was the first gold (Rossetti, 2003, p. 161, 1-4).

By these words, Rossetti again focuses on the seductive feminine beauty through Lady Lilith and describes her as Adam's first wife, a witch and, in a sense, as the serpent of Eden. As a seductress, she "[d]raws men to watch the bright web she can weave" (Rossetti, 2003, p. 161, 7) and she can deceive man easily with her sweet tongue. Clearly, in this sonnet, Rossetti introduces a lady who is strong with her physical beauty. In 1870, Rossetti wrote to his friend Gordon Hake regarding the sonnet as follows:

It represents a Modern Lilith combing out her abundant golden hair and gazing on herself in the glass with that self-absorption by whose strange fascination such natures draw others within their own circle. The idea you indicate (vis: of the perilous principle in the world being female from the first) is about the most essential notion of the sonnet (qtd. in Smith, 1978, s. 98).

As can be deduced from the quotation above, Rossetti introduces "*the New Woman, free of male control, scourge of the patriarchal Victorian family*" (Allen, 1984, p. 286). Besides Lilith's freedom, it is emphasised that she is ageless because "*still she sits, young while the earth is old*" (Rossetti, 2003, p. 161, 5). Moreover, in the poem, her narcissism, in which she is "*subtly of herself contemplative*" (Rossetti, 2003, p. 161, 6) appears. Here, it is clear that Lilith concentrates on herself and her "body's beauty" that concerns both her and man the most. Particularly, Rossetti underlines that Lilith, who has sensual beauty, can cause a man's death through her beauty:

[...] O Lilith, whom shed scent  
 And soft—shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare?  
 Lo! as that youth's eyes burned at thine, so went

Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent

And round his heart one strangling golden hair (Rossetti, 2003, p. 161-62, 10-14).

Hence, Lilith's evil nature and seductive feminine beauty, which is fatal, can destroy men. As pointed out by Çiğdem Kayıhan, Lilith is "*free of strict rules imposed on woman by the society and tradition*" and she is the "*embodiment of ... beauty and sensuality*" (2010, p. 94). Furthermore, her sensuality is, more particularly, represented by her golden hair. In much the same way, Virginia M. Allen describes Lilith as follows:

Lilith, it would seem, is deadly as well as seductive. If not the first, she is certainly an early form of the erotic icon now call the femme fatale, whose flowing hair became an essential part of the design style of Art Nouveau, and whose lethal charms were the primary subjects of the symbolist art (1984, p. 286).

Considering the symbols, it can be obviously understood that both in the painting and the sonnet, there are same elements such as her golden hair and flowers. In the sonnet, it is clear that "*[t]he rose and poppy are her flowers*" (Rossetti, 2003, p. 161, 9). According to Smith, her flowers are symbols of "love" and "death or sleep" which indicate "*love of female beauty leads to destruction*" (1978, p. 96). Unlike the painting in which Lilith uses her coronet made of daisies to deceive man, the sonnet does not include daisies which are the so-called symbol of innocence and purity. Besides the daisies, the purple foxglove on the toilet table in the painting is not mentioned in the sonnet. Yet still, the foxglove can be accepted as one of Lilith's flowers and can be seen as the symbol of insincerity as it is a lovely and beautiful flower that holds a deadly poison. It is evident that the foxglove can be easily attributed to Lilith who is a very beautiful but deadly figure. In fact, the contrasting symbols of love and death in the painting is overtly presented through the foxglove as well as Lilith's beauty especially in his "Soul's Beauty," which can be regarded as a representation of the contrast between two aspects of beauty:

Under the arch of life, where love and death,  
Terror and mystery, guard her shrine, I saw  
Beauty enthroned; and though her gaze struck awe,  
I drew it in as simply as my breath.  
Hers are the eyes which, over and beneath,

The sky and sea bond on thee, -which can draw,  
 By sea or sky or woman, to one law,  
 The allotted bondman of her palm and wreath.  
 This is that Lady Beauty, in whose praise  
 Thy voice and hand shake still, -long known to thee  
 By flying hair and fluttering hem,-the beat  
 Following her daily of thy heart and feet,  
 How passionately and irretrievably,  
 In what fond flight, how many ways and days! (Rossetti, 2003, p. 161,  
 1-14).

### **Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Ballad "Eden Bower"**

Similarly, in his ballad "Eden Bower," through a conversation of Lilith with her former lover Snake, Rossetti continues his theme of fallen woman through Lady Lilith and her seductive beauty. However, the theme extends because of its relation to the Eden story and especially the story of the Fall from Paradise through the myth of Lilith. The poem<sup>4</sup> deals with Lilith's plan for seeking vengeance on Eve. Lilith was a snake at first; but, in order to be the wife of Adam, she was given "*new form and feature*" (Rossetti, 2003, p. 44, 15). As John N. Hobbs puts forward, the poem addresses Lilith's "seductive argument to the snake" which shows that "*she was replaced in Adam's affections by Eve, and she would now reassume the form of a snake to tempt them out of jealousy*" (1968, p. 256-257). Lilith seeks revenge and by using sex in a manipulative manner, she asks the Snake for help and to join her in revenge on Adam, Eve, and even God:

"Help, sweet Snake, sweet lover of Lilith

(Alas the hour!)

And let God learn how I loved and hated

Man in the image of God created.

"Help me once against Eve and Adam!

(Sing Eden Bower!)

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<sup>4</sup> Rossetti's Ballad "Eden Bower" consists of forty nine stanzas and except the last stanza, the first line of each stanza ends with either the name Adam, Eden, or Lilith.

Help me once for this one endeavour,

And then my love shall be thine for ever! (Rossetti, 2003, p. 44, 45-52).

Here, obviously, Lilith promises to be the Snake's lover again as long as he/it helps her in taking revenge. Especially she asks the Snake to exchange physical shapes with her through which she can tempt Eve in order to eat the fruit of "*The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil*" (Rossetti, 2003, p. 45, 88). Here, Lilith, who returns to the Snake after the tempting, foresees the fall of Adam and Eve because for Lilith, who sees the pleasure between Adam and Eve, it is right to punish them:

Two men-children born for their pleasure!

"The first is Cain and the second Abel:

(Sing Eden Bower!)

The soul of one shall be made thy brother,

And thy tongue shall lap the blood of the other." (Alas the hour!)

(Rossetti, 2003, p. 48, 192-197).

Clearly, at the end of the poem, it is seen that Lilith is successful in taking her revenge from the designated figures because she causes not only the fall of Adam and Eve but also of humanity by causing Cain's murder of his brother Abel. Accordingly, Adam thought that Lilith's presence was hell while Eve's was heaven, but Lilith reminded him "*Adam was thrall to Lilith!*" (Rossetti, 2003, p. 44, 21) because of her golden hair and thus, "*Lilith was queen of Adam!*" (Rossetti, 2003, p. 44, 25).

## Conclusion

As a founding member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the Victorian poet-painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti presents various women figures in his poems and paintings especially by addressing the concept of feminine beauty. As Rossetti puts forward that both poetry and painting are "*a means of expressing fundamental intellectual and emotional attitudes*" (Doughty, 1963, p. 5) it can be said that the complications in his life related to his affairs with women of different characters and status caused significant changes both in his representation of women and in his interpretation of female beauty. Accordingly, in his painting *Lady Lilith*, his sonnet "Lilith" and his ballad "Eden Bower" in particular, through the myth-figure of the fatal woman, Rossetti introduces his *femme fatale* who is a sexual seductress with her destructive beauty. At this juncture, through his unconventional *femme fatale* figure, Rossetti

brings a new insight not only to the portrayal of women in Victorian poetry and art but also to the condition of women in the Victorian Period in general.

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### Summary

Founded in 1848 by seven young artists including William Holman Hunt (1827-1910), Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), and John Everett Millais (1829-1896), the Pre-Raphaelite movement can be regarded as a rebellion against the principles of art of the Royal Academy. The members of this literary and artistic creation such as Victorian poets, painters, designers and illustrators, come out against the stereotyped art of the Royal Academy and by exploring medieval, religious, and moral subjects in a non-academic manner, the Pre-Raphaelite movement, which has been used interchangeably as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and Pre-Raphaelitism, brought about a revolution in English poetry and painting. In this regard, it can be accepted as a reaction to the values of Victorian Age especially in relation to the condition of woman in art and society. In this respect, drawing heavily from Dante Gabriel Rossetti's depiction of the sexually attractive and seductive female character, the members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood began to present female figures in their works as seductive

*femme fatales*, which was in total contrast with the Victorian idea of womanhood. Therefore, especially in poetry and painting, female beauty and sexual yearning had a significant place.

As a significant founding member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Rossetti tried to create an aesthetic world in which his concern was beauty rather than didacticism. Thus, in his poems and paintings, the leading Victorian poet-painter Rossetti emphasised feminine beauty by widely using unconventional female figures like fallen women and prostitutes. It is clear that Rossetti presented his great opposition to the dominant Victorian culture and its ideals in his works. Although he was marginalised in the Victorian Age due to his contradictory approach to the condition of women, he became the best representative of art for art's sake movement and managed to display his challenge for strict morality in his time. Accordingly, the main objective of this paper is to examine the depiction of women both in Rossetti's sonnet "Lilith" and painting *Lady Lilith* with reference to his ballad "Eden Bower." Furthermore, this paper analyses how Rossetti introduces his *femme fatale* figure in his works.

Rossetti supported the relationship between painting and poetry by producing the inherent story of each painting. Hence, it is undeniable that Rossetti's sonnet "Body's Beauty" or "Lilith" (1868) and his ballad "Eden Bower" (1869) are related to his painting *Lady Lilith* (1864-1872). Accordingly, in these poems and painting, Rossetti presents the seductive beauty of a woman through his *femme fatale* figures. In order to portray the beautiful female figures, Rossetti borrows from the classical mythology and in all these works, he uses the Jewish mythical figure Lilith. According to the Jewish tradition, Lilith, who is a seductress woman, and evil character, was Adam's first wife and was created before Eve. However, she was banished from the Garden of Eden when she refused to obey him. Then, she turned into a demon figure, the sensual snake-woman, and became the symbol of evilness. Indeed, Rossetti creates his own version of the mythical figure Lilith, out of Lilith myth of the Jewish tradition. Like Rossetti's other marginal female figures, Lady Lilith has straight noses, sensuous red lips, prominent jawlines, long necks, voluminous hair, and powerful physical features which are associated with sexuality. Furthermore, Lady Lilith is, in fact, an apt choice for the Pre-Raphaelite depiction of the *femme fatale* with her strong chin, red lips and golden hair.

It is evident that in Rossetti's painting *Lady Lilith*, his sonnet "Body's Beauty" and his ballad "Eden Bower," his use of the legend of Lilith is functional in that his version of the mythical figure Lilith provides an insight into the lives and condition of Victorian women in art and society. Lady Lilith is the representation of body's beauty and through her feminine beauty, Rossetti displays women's seductive nature. Indeed, Rossetti's achievement as a poet and painter is related to his courage to use the image of the fallen woman in his poetry and painting instead of dealing with pure women who have been expected to be virtuous and submissive to their fathers and husbands. As a Pre-Raphaelite artist, Rossetti introduces his *femme fatale* who is a sexual seductress with her destructive beauty. Although the destructive effect of female beauty on men is emphasised in his works, Rossetti sees women as a source of inspiration for poetry and art. Moreover, by presenting the female beauty and sexuality, he aims to break the sexual taboos in Victorian poetry and art. Not surprisingly, he brings a new insight not only to the portrayal of women in Victorian poetry and art but also to the condition of women in the Victorian Period in general.