

RESEARCH

# “Behind Those Screens” — Bringing Women Forth: Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal

Mariana Bicudo Castelo Branco Cunha

University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies, PT  
mcunha2@campus.ul.pt

This article explores the connections between two Pre-Raphaelite women: Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal. Although they are remembered quite differently, the former as a celebrated poet, the latter as the eternal model, both women share common sufferings and artistic themes. In bringing them forth, the article aims to shed light on how Victorian society may have impacted their life and work. The accuracy of various reports of frailty and poor health regarding the artists is inspected. The article ponders on why Siddal’s artistic output lingers in the shadows, while recognizing the influence of the class system and of gender roles on the lives of these women. This task is achieved through an analysis of selected works which display some of the artists’ central motifs. To conclude, the article assesses the societal restrictions which pervade the works of Rossetti and Siddal, how they attempt to bend or bypass them, and in which ways these shaped their well-being and artistic recognition.

**Keywords:** Pre-raphaelite women; Rossetti; Siddal; Victorian Society

## 1. Introduction

This paper seeks to bring together two contemporary artists who are different on the surface but, as we will see, have much in common. Through this approach I wish to explore the life and work of Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal, in view of their experience as women in society. The poet Christina Rossetti was the sister of the famous Pre-Raphaelite artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who would later marry Elizabeth Siddal, the most notorious model of the time. These women came from different worlds to inhabit similar circles, and even though they were never friends, their work would make them “sisters”.

These works showcase themes related to the authors’ experience within the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Moreover, I will link their works to their position as females in an oppressive society, and analyse their “illness” in relation to their world. Illness and women is a main theme of this paper. Bearing this in mind, I will try to debunk the idea of women as inherently sick, by analysing these female artists’ work and how their “diseases” were either fabricated or a result of a misogynistic environment. Thus, it is interesting to analyse what they suffered from (if they really did suffer from some condition) and how it became part of their legacy. In order to accomplish these goals, I will explore some aspects of the culture of the Victorian society in terms of art and science.

## 2. Beautiful corpses

The expression “cult of invalidism” sums up perfectly what the Victorians worshiped. To be physically weak was a sign of purity in women, for a healthy woman was anomalous (Dijkstra 25–26). This was truly a trend of nineteenth century society, and women actually started to eat less in order to achieve the saintly consumptive look; they wished to be pallid and fragile, a sort of woman-girl (Dijkstra 29), the sort of beautiful women painted by men then, and art certainly helped cement cultural ideals and preconceptions (Dijkstra 29). To die was the final offering of a woman to the man she was meant to serve, and in marriage a woman’s individuality and will were lost (Dijkstra 30). The favourite women for men painters, muses like Elaine, Ophelia, The Lady of Shalott and Mariana, were a representation of the woman gone mad for not having

a man to surrender to (Dijkstra 37).<sup>1</sup> These figures fitted the time's fashion perfectly. The Lady of Shalott, for instance is the passive, self-destructive woman in the water, ruined because of her electrifying love for Lancelot (Dijkstra 39). But no woman was more adored than Shakespeare's Ophelia, cherished by the Pre-Raphaelites, because she totally corresponded to the male dream of that time. This obsession with a woman's deathly sleep was also followed by female artists, who did not really have a choice, if they wanted to gain recognition (Dijkstra 58). There was a sexual implication in these fantasies of lifeless women. The desire to conquer a woman who cannot even fight, to have total power over a body, was a manifestation of the uneven relationship between genders, as well as of a sort of male greed.

For the Victorians, the figure of the dead woman was equated with attractiveness. The dead woman was desirable because she was there to be looked upon, for her beauty, she was passive hence controllable, and therefore perfect. In *The Legend of Elizabeth Siddal*, Jan Marsh explains:

This was the high period of Aestheticism as an artistic and cultural fashion, with its promotion of decorative beauty and art-for-art's-sake rather than sacred or storytelling subjects. Increasingly through the 1880s and 1890s, strands of Aestheticism developed through contact with the Symbolist movement in Europe into the poetic and pictorial cult of Decadence, with its representation of perverse desire for pleasurable pain, usually at the hands of a pale woman, 'perfect and poisonous', who is a figure of Death. From the work of Baudelaire, Gautier, Huysmans and Wilde through that of Moreau, Redon and Beardsley, sensual depictions of death in female shape became a recurrent artistic motif – images not of regret but of destructive lust: erotic visions of mortality that destroy what they desire. (26–27)

We can obviously see similarities between this figure of Death and Elizabeth Siddal, at least in the way in which she was portrayed by the Pre-Raphaelites. She is Ophelia, she is the poster girl<sup>2</sup> for men's fetish of dead and beautiful women. Siddal's purpose as a model (remember she famously posed for *Ophelia* by John Everett Millais) was to be looked at and desired, much like a work of art, and she was thus reduced to the one-dimensional character she always played in paintings, not a person, but a ghost pressed on a canvas. This is not who she was, but who she became, the Pre-Raphaelite legend, the mascot (Marsh, *Legend* 50).

This legacy lives on till this day, partly because many who wrote about her were men, like William Rossetti, who, long after her death and the decline of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, saw Lizzie as the embodiment of the nostalgic glory of the past, and thus perpetuated these ideas about her, not caring about their veracity (Marsh, *Legend* 51). She was the representation of strict Victorian gender roles, and consequently a time when women were more easily dominated by men (Marsh, *Legend* 51). The adoration of sickly-looking women is linked to women's place in Victorian society, the home, and not the public world. This preference for vulnerability helped maintain the *status quo* (Fernandes 99). What is more, if being delicate and feeble defines a "feminine woman", then it is easy to see how women who looked frail and child-like became the mainstream object of desire (Fernandes 99).

To conclude this introductory section, we can reflect on the problems that romanticizing death and illness can bring about. Firstly, we should recognize that a desire like this is rather sinister, and, furthermore, it is alarmingly close to necrophilia.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, we may begin to ponder on how a male constructed fantasy of sickly women as the epitome of beauty can play a role in female oppression. Bearing this in mind, we can only imagine how difficult life must have been for women who wished to play traditionally male roles, in a society that worshiped females who were passive like corpses.

### 3. Two women artists – similar but different

In order to understand the work and life of Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal in the nineteenth century, we need to comprehend how this society saw women and specifically women in art.

<sup>1</sup> Here Dijkstra explains how these female characters were considered attractive, for being the example of the lady which succumbs to sexual impulses because she needs to sacrifice herself for a man. The idea is that a woman only existed to fall into the hands of her beloved and, moreover, that she needs him in order to make sense of her own existence.

<sup>2</sup> The term "poster girl" is commonly used to describe a woman who epitomizes or represents a specified quality or cause. This term originates from "poster child" meaning "a person having a public image that is identified with something (such as a cause)", according to the online *Merriam-Webster* dictionary.

<sup>3</sup> According to the online *Merriam-Webster* dictionary, necrophilia is an "obsession with and usually erotic interest in or stimulation by corpses".

During this period, genius was exclusively male, hence if a woman showed signs of genius, she would be considered abnormal or even without sex. Women were expected to stay at home, but never to have artistic aspirations (Duby and Perrot 254). Yet, we find an ironic contradiction, since women (from middle to high classes) were taught art, painting and music, but only to increase their suitability for marriage (Duby and Perrot 257). This sums up perfectly the woman's role, which consisted of making herself as attractive as possible for marriage, after which she would restrict herself to a life of domesticity, while her husband would carry on a public career.

Still, a number of women managed to become artists in this man's world, but how? Not surprisingly, it was often through men that women found their way into the art field, for most famous female artists were, at one point, the model, partner or pupil of a prominent male art figure (Duby and Perrot 272). This was, however, risky for women, on many levels, since there was the danger of your work being attributed to the man close to you, and, moreover, you could gain a reputation (Duby and Perrot 272). Considering that everyone assumed that models would maintain sexual relationships with the artists for whom they worked, becoming associated with an artist could mean for the woman being seen as a sort of higher rank prostitute, getting paid to sell her body (Duby and Perrot 266). This leads us to the topic of sexuality and art. Male artists had total control over their female subjects, mirroring gender roles in society (Duby and Perrot 264). As such, the woman was seen through male eyes, and this is particularly obvious in nudes, very rarely portraying women who were not considered "attractive" to men, such as older women (Duby and Perrot 264–266).

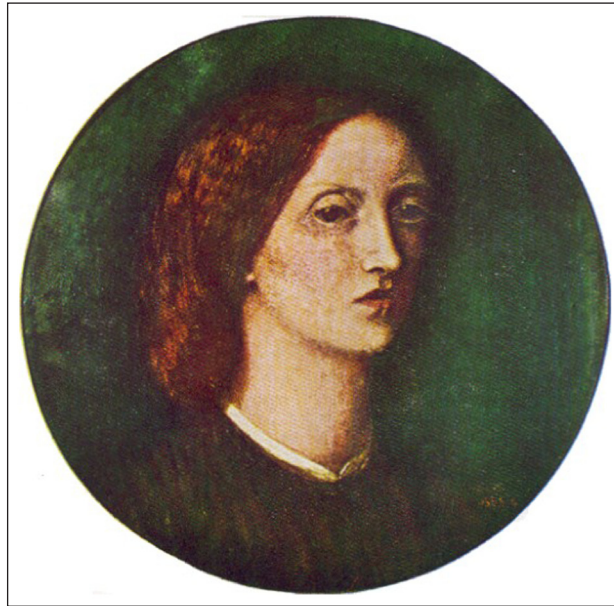
Elizabeth Siddal is a clear illustration of this ethos. She was lusted over as the immortal Ophelia, but she dreamed of more. However, becoming an artist was not easy. It was indeed hard for women to get an art education in the mid-1800s, especially for those without money; and practicing art as an amateur was graceful and feminine, but to pursue it as a career was not suitable (Marsh, *The Legend* 165). These circumstances would lead us to think that Elizabeth Siddal's association with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was not accidental, but a strategic move from her part, as Jan Marsh suggests (*The Legend* 165). Siddal's father had moved up the class ladder. Being born in the skilled working class in Sheffield, he became a successful retail shopkeeper in the capital, and though his daughters were not ladies by birth, their mother had ambitions for them. It seems that the family was not happy with her artistic interests, and modelling was not exactly a respectable job, so if Siddal's father was not willing to pay for classes, she used her ties with the Brotherhood to learn from and with them (Marsh, *The Legend* 163, 165). Something worth mentioning, to illustrate the nineteenth century view of women, is the final remark William Rossetti makes about his late sister-in-law in an article he published years after her death, in which he talks about her life and work. He states:

I will conclude this brief account of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal by saying that, without overrating her actual performances in either painting or poetry, one must fairly pronounce her to have been a woman of unusual capacities, and worthy of being espoused to a painter and poet. (Rossetti 295)

I think this final sentence shows perfectly the previously mentioned idea that genius is male and not female. Saying that Elizabeth was "a woman of unusual capacities" might seem like a compliment, and it was in fact meant to be one, except it is actually a sign of how sexist society was constructed at the time. Women were not deemed to be naturally artistically gifted, and Elizabeth was considered quite good for a woman, yet she was obviously inferior in comparison to men.

Throughout time, many have come to suggest that Elizabeth Siddal's art (see **Figure 1**) was probably heavily influenced by Gabriel Rossetti, and that he was even partly responsible for her drawings (Marsh, *The Legend* 174, 175). But research would deny these claims. According to Marsh, Rossetti's teaching was mainly an encouragement of Siddal to follow her instinct and work from imagination (Marsh, *The Legend* 174). Overall, it appears that Rossetti did not teach Siddal nearly as much as many would claim, but unfortunately her oeuvre has been discredited and overshadowed by her husband's. In an ironic turn of events, it looks like it was Siddal who actually influenced Rossetti. The lack of sophistication in his works of the mid-1850s, like in *Arthur's Tomb* (1855) could only be explained by a purposeful imitation of Siddal's naïve style, since Rossetti shows how accomplished he could be in other works (Marsh, *The Legend* 188–189).

Although we do not know much about Elizabeth Siddal's life prior to her meeting the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, we do know quite a lot about Christina Rossetti's life in general. Christina was rather lucky, in comparison with her contemporary artists and writers, because she was taught by her father and grandfather prosody and diction, for instance, and during her teenage years she would play poetry composition games with her brother William (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 82). She was encouraged in the pursuit of art, and later on her brother Gabriel would expand her literary insight, through discussing with her contemporary poetry, introducing her to information their parents would not (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 82).



**Figure 1:** *Self Portrait* (1853–54) by Elizabeth Siddal.

Source: Siddal, Elizabeth. *Self Portrait*. 1853–1854, *LizzieSiddal.com*, <http://lizziesiddal.com/portal/self-portrait/>.

Despite the fact that Christina came from a family open to the art world, she still found hurdles along the way. Christina's lifelong struggle in between her male ambition and her female submission started early. She refused to join Gabriel's literary club, because this would be seen as a display, as conceited and boastful; she was afraid of being part of a male art club for what it could do to her reputation and she feared criticism and rejection as well (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 83, 84). She struggled with feminist inclinations, for though she desired to be as independent as Gabriel, or as any man was, she was frightened by dreams that were not proper for a young woman (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 184). Most certainly this sort of contradictions was due to a traditional patriarchal upbringing, where her father was the "head of the house" – this early learned respect for Man was clearly contrary to any feminist thinking (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 185).

#### 4. The "weaker sex"

Elizabeth Siddal's health, like the rest of her life, seems to be plagued by false accounts. For instance, Helen Angeli described her as very sick, neurotic, inclined to melancholia, often seriously ill, with a tuberculosis tendency (Marsh, *Legend* 127). Nowadays others have diagnosed Siddal with *anorexia nervosa*, a "fashionable" condition of the twenty first century (Marsh, *Legend* 147). We do know that when Elizabeth was visited by the doctor she was not considered to be in good health (Marsh, *Legend* 62). Dr. Garth Wilkinson diagnosed her with a curved spine in 1854, and she was encouraged to enter the Harley Street sanatorium (Marsh, *Legend* 62). However, in 1855, she was given a less serious diagnosis of stress, without any indication of a biological disease, and in 1857 she actually used water therapy at the spa of Matlock in the Peak District, unfortunately without apparent results (Marsh, *Legend* 62). In letters to his brother William, Gabriel complained about his despair over Lizzie's terrible health (Marsh, *Legend* 62). When Ruskin starts sending Siddal a quarterly allowance for her works, he also starts advising on her health, telling her to go rest in the country (Shefer 24). Coincidentally, the so-called "rest-cure", invented by Silas Weir Mitchell, an American physician and nerve specialist, is known to have been assigned to more women than men (Sigurðardóttir 3). Seemingly, after marriage, Lizzie's state ameliorated, and after having a stillborn daughter she recovered rather quickly (Marsh, *Legend* 63). Yet symptoms of illness never disappeared, until her last days. This is one version of events. The fact that we find many accounts of Elizabeth's poor health speaks to the gender bias of the time but also to the meaning of disease. Because a woman's state of illness makes her man the saviour; so if she is frail and delicate, he is seen as the much-needed strong and caring by-stander (Marsh, *Legend* 63). Marsh states that there is no evidence that Siddal actually suffered from a physical ailment, since she never showed signs of spinal curvature nor any of the staple signs of tuberculosis (Marsh, *Legend* 63). She seemed to suffer from neuralgia, but this term was new at the time, describing intense headaches or migraine; moreover, it is quite ambiguous and may not be considered a disease (Marsh, *Legend* 63). Furthermore,

Lizzie's friend, Georgiana Burne-Jones, even wondered how it was possible for her to suffer so much without ever having a real condition (Marsh, *Legend* 63). It is probable that the different accounts of Siddal's frail health (even by herself) were excessive, fabricated or metaphors for psychological anguish and eventually consequences of her drug addiction (Marsh, *Legend* 63).

Not unlike Elizabeth Siddal, Christina Rossetti was often described as ill. As a teenager she had a breakdown and was diagnosed as having a type of insanity, religious mania, besides appearing anaemic, pale and older than her age (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 52). This was when she was between sixteen and eighteen years old, and today an adolescent breakdown would not be so strange (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 52). However, at the time this was a type of mental illness related to exaggerated self-blame, a feeling probably due to the family's strong religious beliefs (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 53). Like her father, Christina seemed to blame herself a lot, feeling guilty, and actually cutting herself with a pair of scissors (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 53, 50). This self-mutilation was perhaps a way of outwardly expressing her self-hatred and pious guilt (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 50). Overall, it seems that she was suffering from depression, according to Marsh (*Writer's Life* 52–53). William Rossetti states that his sister's "illness" was a very important aspect of her life, still it is safe to say that when she fell ill, depression was always part of the issue (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 168). Whether Christina suffered from a real disease or not, she considered herself as fragile in terms of health, and this is what really matters. Being ill, whatever that truly meant, was part of her self-image, and while it sometimes freed her from certain tasks it also imprisoned her (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 169). Jan Marsh, in *A Writer's Life*, argues it is possible that, at twelve or thirteen years of age, Christina was a victim of sexual abuse, perhaps by her father (260). If this is true (although we will probably never know) it could explain much of the burden of guilt experienced by her throughout her life, for often victims of molestation blame themselves for what was done to them. Besides, it could potentially be a reason behind Christina's several nervous breakdowns. Right after the publishing of *Goblin Market* Christina fell sick. This in fact was quite a common occurrence for female authors. Virginia Woolf and Maria Jane Jewsbury would also suffer similar types of health conditions in the same circumstances (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 284). We must understand that publishing was, in a way, an act of rebellion against patriarchy, and not very ladylike. The fact that Christina's book was gaining attention was stressful, and could be seen as defiant; so falling ill was the feminine and fragile counterbalance to a masculine form of expression (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 284). Despite *Goblin Market* being quite conservative in keeping to feminine themes of religion and fantasy, Christina's embarrassment and aversion to too much attention is shown when she responds to Macmillan (her publisher) declining to sit for a photograph (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 284). Christina wanted the recognition but feared it at the same time.

One of the main similarities between Siddal and Rossetti is their illness. The fact that these female artists' biographies are plagued by disease, seemingly of the mind and body, should not be perhaps so surprising. Hysteria was after all the most popular malady during the eighteenth and nineteenth century among women (Ussher 63). Even though men could also be diagnosed with hysteria it remained decidedly a female disorder, related to women's essence (Ussher 63). Interestingly, women diagnosed with hysteria could exhibit symptoms ranging from depression to speech disturbances (Ussher 64). In 1840, Laycock<sup>4</sup> described hysteria as a woman's 'natural state', whereas for man it was considered a 'morbid state' (Smith-Rosenberg 206). Furthermore, in 1903 Otto Weininger<sup>5</sup> affirmed that 'hysteria is the organic crisis of the organic mendacity of woman' (Bronfen 115). Moreover, in the mid nineteenth century, women actually outnumbered male patients in mental asylums (Sigurðardóttir 5). There was a clear gender bias in terms of mental health. Society, including the scientific circles, saw women as naturally more inclined to being sick. This prejudice leaks into the legacy of female artists. The way their story is told is "tarnished" by their presumed weakness, whether it be true or not. We only have to ask: how many times have we heard the tale of the sickly woman? Of the mad woman?<sup>6</sup>

Let us consider the claims of illness for Rossetti and Siddal. In both cases there is much ambiguity and contradiction, yet it seems to me that depression is the common link between them. Doctors declared that Rossetti and Siddal had different physical illnesses, but many of these were apparently untrue conclusions.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Laycock (1812–1876) was an English physiologist, known for classifying mental illnesses (see Smith). The claim by him noted in the text was made in his work *An Essay on Hysteria* (1840), pages 76, 103, 105.

<sup>5</sup> Otto Weininger (1880–1903) was an Austrian philosopher, author of *Geschlecht und Charakter* (1903; *Sex and Character*), in which he categorizes the masculine element as positive, productive, and moral, and the feminine as negative, unproductive, and amoral (according to The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica).

<sup>6</sup> Concerning the figure of the madwoman see *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination* (1984) by Gilbert and Gubar, particularly pages 77–80.

Still, a mental disease like depression seems to be present in both. I would argue that this could be a result of their oppressive environment. We have evidence that this can be true, from accounts of the artists' lives, when physical illness and oppressive or stressful events occur simultaneously. So, we could argue that if women are "mad" it is not because the female sex is inherently weaker and women have a tendency to be sick and fragile, but because women are strong enough to resist and battle an oppressive sexist society. The truth is any human being, living in a world essentially inimical, would be prone to falter every now and then.

## 5. Analysis of works

### 5.1 Works by Christina Rossetti

*Song*, from 1848,<sup>7</sup> is one of Christina Rossetti's most famous poems; however, the story behind it is not so well known. Christina had become engaged to James Collinson, a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, despite the fact that she did not love him and that he was catholic (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 89, 91). She eventually declined the offer; still, this event was important. Collinson was considered inferior to Rossetti, she was not yet eighteen, and he was not yet independent from his family. Moreover, Rossetti's father was against Papacy, which meant marrying a member of the Catholic Church, a papist, would not be well received by the patriarch (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 90, 91, 92). This whole affair was perhaps orchestrated by Gabriel, because he liked Collinson and wanted Christina to be able to participate more in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, giving her more independence (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 90, 91). Christina was not truly in love with Collinson, but hoped the feeling would come eventually, the proposal was complimentary, she trusted Gabriel, and turning it down would not be so simple (Marsh *Writer's Life* 92, 93). Hence, Christina used the religious difference as the reason for refusing to marry Collinson. As a response to this, James renounced his faith and renewed his proposal (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 92). He then painted an oil portrait of her, and later went back home to Mansfield with it, along with Christina's brother William, to tell his family of the engagement, (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 95). During James's absence, Christina wrote *Song*.

When I am dead, my dearest,  
Sing no sad songs for me;  
Plant thou no roses at my head,  
Nor shady cypress tree:  
Be the green grass above me  
With showers and dewdrops wet;  
And if thou wilt, remember,  
And if thou wilt, forget.  
I shall not see the shadows,  
I shall not feel the rain;  
I shall not hear the nightingale  
Sing on, as if in pain:  
And dreaming through the twilight  
That doth not rise nor set,  
Haply I may remember,  
And haply may forget.

In the poem, we can find a sort of prediction that she would not be able to survive matrimony if it ever happened (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 101). Perhaps unconsciously, she already knew what was to come. Overtime, she met the Collinsons and even spent a month with them, during which she found herself bored and wearied out by empty polite conversation (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 101). In 1850 (in May or June) James returned to his Catholic faith, and so the engagement came to an end, as well as Collinson's involvement with the Brotherhood (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 113). This was devastating for Christina, who was by now completely committed to her fiancé (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 114).

Going back to the poem, Rossetti rehearsed her death long before it happened (Leighton 376). For Rossetti, the figure of the dead woman encompasses many contradictions (Leighton 376). Apparently, a figure of passivity, according to Leighton, the dead woman seems to hold knowledge, which is ambiguous, maybe no knowledge at all, but a form of consciousness free from knowledge (376). Doubt is a major theme in Rossetti's famous song, as we have twilight as an in-between state to blur the divide between the world

<sup>7</sup> Rossetti composed *Song (When I am dead, my dearest)* in 1848. It was first published in *Goblin Market and Other Poems*.

of the living and that of the dead (Leighton 380). The figure of the dead woman suggests an obsession with that threshold between earth and heaven, lover and loved one, which provides the emotional tension, and the moral message, of so many of her works (Leighton 380). The figure of the dead or dreaming woman is thus rarely, for Rossetti, a figure of self-pity or reproach (Leighton 387). She has an untouchable secret which the poem itself cannot reach (Leighton 388). Through having fun with the very idea of dying, she is reclaiming the fetichized dead woman, without action. She goes peacefully, because she knows what we do not. As Leighton describes, to die is not viewed by Rossetti as becoming an object, but actually becoming an autonomous subject (388).

*In an Artist's Studio* was the last poem of 1856, written on Christmas Eve, ensuing a visit to Gabriel's flat, full of sketches of Lizzie Siddal, but lacking her physical presence (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 186). Their relationship at this time was tumultuous, Gabriel spoke of marriage but did not keep his word, causing Lizzie to leave London (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 186). Christina may not have known all the details of their troubles, still the sonnet represents the sad gap between the positions of man and woman, artist and model in Victorian society (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 186). When poems were being selected to be published by Macmillan, *In an Artist's Studio* was rejected, possibly because it so obviously depicted Elizabeth Siddal's relationship with the poet's brother, Gabriel (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 271).

One face looks out from all his canvases,  
 One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:  
 We found her hidden just behind those screens,  
 That mirror gave back all her loveliness.  
 A queen in opal or in ruby dress,  
 A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,  
 A saint, an angel — every canvas means  
 The same one meaning, neither more or less.  
 He feeds upon her face by day and night,  
 And she with true kind eyes looks back on him,  
 Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:  
 Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;  
 Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;  
 Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.

Here we are presented with the artist's act of consumption: "He feeds upon her face by day and night." The woman is merely a passive object on which the artist projects his fantasies and dreams. We could say that the man is the predator, the woman is the prey, he is the master she is his puppet. In the last line "Not as she is, but as she fills his dream." we find the idea that the girl is not herself, but she plays whatever role he assigns her to.

The woman who perhaps aspired to be an agent of exchange, to negotiate money or love or marriage for the use of her face—even, like Lizzie (and Christina), to author her own exchangeable objects of beauty—has been herself reduced to that object, and consumed... women can more easily sell themselves than what they can produce—and to its consequence: if they enter the marketplace, they risk being literally consumed. (Helsing 911)

This issue is, for instance, also present in Rossetti's poem *Goblin Market*. I can sell my image if I am attractive, in which case others will consume me — I am the product, yet I cannot be the producer. For my work, the product of my mind and skill is not valued because I am a woman. We can almost find similarities in this issue of women's roles as muses or models, and the modern-day prevalence of pornography. If women are viewed as objects, then that is how they can more easily sell themselves. This problem has its genesis in the fact that the market is created by men: they made the rules of the game, thus the game will favour the male sex. This creates a difficulty for women — how can they change the rules of the game if they have very little power? They can participate by selling what they know is appealing to the powerful.

## 5.2 Works by Elizabeth Siddal

Elizabeth Siddal's work *The Lady of Shalott* (see **Figure 2**), dated December 1853, was one of the first representations of Tennyson's poem, and also her first signed work, suggesting she began to see herself as an artist (Marsh, *Legend* 176).



**Figure 2:** *The Lady of Shalott* by Elizabeth Siddal.

Source: Siddal, Elizabeth. *The Lady of Shalott*. 1853, *LizzieSiddal.com*, <http://lizziesiddal.com/portal/tennyson-the-lady-of-shalott/>.

As Jan Marsh puts it, in *The Legend of Elizabeth Siddal*, “Artistically, the drawing recalls the early work of the PRB, in terms of both its presentation of a single female figure and of its awkward, *faux-naïf* manner.” (Marsh, *Legend* 177). Because of her ties with the Brotherhood she could have seen Holman Hunt’s version of the poem from 1850, though it is quite different from Siddal’s rendition (Marsh, *Legend* 177). Interestingly, what some would see as lack of skill, due to the stiff and awkward body position of the lady, is actually probably an evidence of something very influential for the Pre-Raphaelites, and that is medieval art (Marsh, *Legend* 177). In fact, we find similarities between Siddal’s work and an image inside an illuminated manuscript of Christine de Pisan’s *Cité des Dames* (Marsh, *Legend* 177). Here follows an excerpt from the poem *Lady of Shalott* (see Lord Tennyson):

The sun came dazzling thro’ the leaves  
And flamed upon the brazen greaves  
Of bold Sir Lancelot.

His broad clear brow in sunlight glowed;  
On burnished hoofs his war-horse trode;  
From underneath his helmet flowed  
His coal-black curls as on he rode,  
As he rode down to Camelot.  
(...)

She left the web, she left the loom,  
She made three paces thro’ the room.  
(...)

Out flew the web and floated wide;  
The mirror cracked from side to side;  
‘The curse is come upon me,’ cried  
The Lady of Shalott.

Siddal has chosen to depict the moment the confined Lady of Shalott sees Sir Lancelot’s reflection in the mirror, which is so irresistible that it causes her to gaze upon him directly. This in turn makes her leave her loom and so the mirror cracks, bringing the curse upon her and killing her. In the drawing, the Lady seems to be a pure, serene and devout person. The crucifix attests to her piousness, and she represents



the typical Victorian ideas of female conduct: modesty, chastity and occupying one's time with a suitable feminine activity (Marsh, *Legend* 176). In Siddal's work we find calmness, order, and quietness inside the woman's room (Shefer 25). The knight is not even a real person, but an image seen through a mirror, a distant reflection (Shefer 25). Moreover, Siddal's Lady looks away from his image and her expression reflects neither expectancy nor sexual excitement (Shefer 25). In Siddal's drawing we find two worlds: the exterior, symbolized by the mirror image of the knight in the faraway landscape, and the interior, where the woman is placed (Shefer 25). This dichotomy of worlds, woman and the home, man and his outdoor activities, is a part of Victorian thinking, formularized in "the woman at the window" paintings of the 1850s (Shefer 26). In *The Lady of Shalott*, as in her other drawings, Siddal carefully maintained as traditional formula (Shefer 26). Although Siddal's insistence upon predictable Victorian roles may have been inadvertent, it was deeply personal (Shefer 26). One could say that, rather than pictorializing Tennyson's poem, like Hunt and Rossetti, Siddal creates another story, the story of Elizabeth Siddal, the artist (Shefer 26). *The Lady of Shalott*, or what we could call a self-portrait of the artist, reveals that Siddal perhaps saw the Lady as the author of a work (Shefer 26). In this adaptation of Tennyson's poem, the focus is not on the deadly fate of a woman enamoured with a knight, but on the woman and her work.

According to Jan Marsh, Siddal's poem *The Lust of the Eyes* bears "exceptional piquancy in its implicit comment on the Pre-Raphaelite artists' aesthetic adoration of female beauty" (211). Indeed, the poem presents the idea that beauty only inspires fleeting transient love.

I care not for my Lady's soul  
Though I worship before her smile;  
I care not where be my Lady's goal  
When her beauty shall lose its wile.

Low sit I down at my Lady's feet  
Gazing through her wild eyes  
Smiling to think how my love will fleet  
When their starlike beauty dies.

I care not if my Lady pray  
To our Father which is in Heaven  
But for joy my heart's quick pulses play  
For to me her love is given.

Then who shall close my Lady's eyes  
And who shall fold her hands?  
Will any hearken if she cries  
Up to the unknown lands?

We can imagine the voice in the poem being the artist's, as he speaks of his lady, whom he won't love when she loses her beauty, perhaps a feeling Siddal was familiar with. Overall, the poem appears to be a reflection on how she, a woman, is only wanted and desired for her physical attributes, because her value in society lies in them. The male voice has no concern for his lady's soul or her goals, meaning her interior life or personality, and her own interests or wants, because she will be of no importance when her beauty withers away. In spite of this seemingly selfish and misogynistic approach, the artist in the end is worried for his lady's loneliness: if when her beauty dies so does she to everyone, then who will take care of her? Still, he contradicts himself, with the repeated "I do not care for my Lady's...". the use of the verb to care is profound, with many meanings – to care for someone, as in caring for and loving one, or caring as in paying attention to one. The male character apparently cares but only to a degree, in effect he displays an honest selfishness in his admission of being superficial. Perhaps there is some guilt or shame in knowing that he participates in the disposal of his Lady.

Let us now examine some contemporary (dis)similarities between the two artists. Even though Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal were not very close in life, in art they explored similar themes as we find links between their ideas. Apparently, Christina did not see in Elizabeth the same beauty and appeal that Gabriel saw; moreover, her family of shopkeepers was probably not seen with high regard by the Rossettis (Marsh, *Writer's Life* 170). We can imagine Christina would have wanted someone more "refined" for a sister-in-law, since Lizzie did not bear such a reputation. In spite of their seemingly cold relationship, there is much that

brings them together. Death is a theme approached by both in a similar manner. Rossetti is known for anticipating afterlife with eagerness, as we have seen above. Siddal also makes a connection between death and light in *Lord, May I Come*, when writing:

Life and night are falling from me,  
 Death and day are opening on me,  
 Wherever my footsteps come and go,  
 Life is a stony way of woe.  
 Lord, have I long to go?

She links opposite ideas, death is day, life is night, using an antithesis for contrast. Clearly death is more desirable than life, described as a state of woe. She asks "have I long to go?" indicating her yearning for the hereafter, for which she can hardly wait.

Overall, the poetry of Rossetti and Siddal has similarities in theme and form. Both artfully hide complexity behind simple anatomy, and they paint in cold colours lost love, and anger in a fiery glow. Besides this stylistic closeness, they show an understanding and scrutiny of their position as women in art, by cleverly addressing, in their writing, the traps of objectification of which their gender is a victim.

## 6. Conclusion

We have discussed the Victorian's obsession with ill deathly-looking women, to contextualize the work and life of Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal, two women who dreamed of becoming everything they were not supposed to be. Even though Rossetti did establish herself as a poet and will be remembered for that, she still lived a complicated life of issues related to her suppressed ambition and health. Elizabeth Siddal was less fortunate than her sister-in-law. She is remembered as the archetypal Pre-Raphaelite model with a tragic death, when in reality she was trying to be an artist, like the men who made her famous. In this battle of female uprising against male domination, Siddal is the biggest casualty.

We may conclude that this paper focuses mainly on women's supposed frailty and how it affects their art. The two artists considered in this reading were both known for their so-called weak health, and I argue that if they were "sick", it was because this was partly appealing and partly the normalized female role. On one hand, Siddal's sickness and early death only made her more attractive, according to Victorian standards, on the other hand, Rossetti's fragility was perhaps useful as atonement for her defiant acts in public society. I like to think that, in spite of this veil of fragility, the work that survives these singular women is the proof that in the face of great difficulty they still won. In fact, we should perhaps reconsider if vulnerability or weakness are negative at all. Why do we perceive these stereotypical feminine traits as a sign of inferiority, why is femininity considered inferior? I would argue that if being emotional, thus feminine, is a hindrance, then half of the population is gravely impaired. The real problem, which affected the authors here discussed, is that vulnerability is not inherently bad, but has been regarded as such. Therefore, those of us who demonstrate it are degraded for it.

If there is one overarching lesson to be found, it is that art and life are inextricably linked. Just as the poems or drawings of artists reflect their experiences, the works of art which survive time shape our view of the past, and make us question our own life and current society. Particularly, when someone like Elizabeth Siddal, a crucial figure of her day, has a very small catalogue to show. In cases like this, I cannot help but wonder why, and dream that one day more of her work will be unearthed. Hopefully, thanks greatly to authors like Jan Marsh, the lost work of women can slowly gain the attention it deserves.

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During her MA, the author was supervised by Ana Cristina Mendes, Editor-in-Chief, and co-supervised by Isabel Cunha Fernandes, General Editor.

## Author Information

Mariana Bicudo Cunha completed in 2019 an MA in English and American Studies at the School of Arts and Humanities, University of Lisbon. Her dissertation focuses on a conjunctural analysis of the film *Belle* (2013) by Amma Asante. She holds a BA (2016) in Psychology from the Faculty of Psychology, University of Lisbon.

Her research interests are Women's Writing and Art, Feminist Studies, Cultural Studies, Post-Colonial Studies, Representations of Gender and Race.

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