From Femininity to Feminism in Christina Rossetti’s “The Iniquity of the Fathers upon the Children”

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Abstract

“The Iniquity of the Fathers upon the Children” is about an illegitimate daughter’s view of her mother and father. Its original title in the first edition in 1866 was “Under the Rose.” It’s a long narrative poem in which Christina Rossetti noted women’s issues.

In Learning Not to Be First—The Life of Christina Rossetti, Kathleen Jones describes the poem as “one of her [Christina’s] rare ‘political pieces’” (123). Rossetti explains the hardships women in general faced in society at that time. Jones comments that the poem “deals with a subject of great concern to Christina—the plight of the unmarried mother, and in particular the fate of the child” (123).

In The achievement of Christina Rossetti, Dolores Rosenblum indicates that the poem “is also a pivotal poem in that it confronts the issue of what is and is not canonical in art, specifically in Rossetti’s art” (142). That means that Christina Rossetti also shows her interest in women’s issues as did other women writers in her time, though she wasn’t active as a feminist.

I am fascinated by Rossetti’s poems especially the sentimental expressions in her lines. Rossetti’s poems are similar to Chinese poems that I prefer to read such as those by Li Haku (李白), Su Shi (蘇東坡), and Li Qingzhao (李清照). Reading Chinese poems allows me to realize the ancient China and studying Rossetti’s poem allows me to enjoy Victorian culture and literature though I live in the 20th century.

During the Victorian period social systems improved in various fields, for
example, women began working outside the home, women got voting rights, etc. Competing with the male’s literature, women such as E. Browning, Georgia Eliot, etc., wrote notable stories about women. The conventional women’s image as an angel in the home, made by male-centered society, was gradually transformed. Some poetesses and other female writers demanded equal treatment with men and their works.

Some Victorian fictions, particularly written by women, began to claim that femininity prevents women from being dependent. Feminists began to demand the same rights for women as for men. To women, it seemed that femininity is less important than to be an independent woman. To be a mother and a wife, I understand that a woman needs to be equipped with both femininity and independence to manage her own life and her family.

This paper tries to explore how a young girl learns to overcome the conflicts in the old traditional convention and to live independently as her growth progresses. In other words, how a girl transforms from a dependent object to an independent woman.

1. Introduction

Often the image of “Rose” is used by poets and in literary works. There is, for example, a sentimental emotion inscribed in William Blake’s “The Sick Rose” and the most beautiful flower praised in Oscar Wilde’s “The Nightingale and Rose”. These works make the readers’ heart beat to enjoy the different character of roses. Preferring on her favorite Blake, in Christina Rossetti’s poems she often uses the “rose”, for example, “The Rose”, “Queen Rose” … etc. Every rose has a different character in each poem, some symbolize women’s beauty, others express woman’s sadness, bitterness, suffering, etc.

Starting in the first stanza of “The Iniquity of the Fathers upon the Children”, the heroine narrated her story in a gloomy mood to expose her unfortunate life.

Oh the rose of keenest thorn!
The rose is used as a metaphor here, one for the girl herself whose fate was full of bitterness like the "keenest thorn" and another for her mother who bore an illegitimate daughter as an imperfect rose. The "rose" with the "keenest thorn" symbolizes her life which injures and shames her mother. The speaker proclaims that she is forced to live in a "hidden" shadowy place without a name because she is born "under the rose" when her mother was only sixteen years old. Her young mother’s ignorance makes the speaker an unfortunate child.

Rossetti skillfully extends the images of the "rose" to exclaim the issues of unfair treatment for woman, for example, unmarried women giving birth to illegal children. Rossetti is sensitive to the social realities of women’s issues and ably expresses the double images, femininity and feminism, of woman’s essential abilities. As Rosenblum comments,

"Rossetti is thus ironically qualifying the symbol of womanhood—the rose—and linking it with the fall or fate of women, for this poem tells the story of an illegitimate child, a consequence of male seduction, and of the mother, who, fearing the judgment of a patriarchal, rejects her daughter" (142).

According to traditional convention woman is required to behave as an angel before getting married. And femininity is regarded as a woman’s essence by male-centered society. Women’s faults are severely criticized by society but men’s are permitted. The reason is that most women could not live independently either financially or politically.

In the Victorian Period, an illegitimate girl was not accepted in society.
Particularly Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* is known as the first book of feminism. In *A Mid-Victorian Feminist, Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon*, Sheila Herstein describes:

Wollstonecraft “asked for equal educational and professional opportunities for women, full citizenship, and the right of married women to own property and to have a share in the custody of their children in case of marital separation. She also wanted men to be legally responsible for their illegitimate children” (43).

Such social themes of women’s unfair treatment were popular in the literature of that time, for example Thomas Hardy’s *Under the Greenwood Tree*, and Elizabeth B. Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, etc. Rossetti respected Browning’s poetry and Rossetti was greatly affected by Browning’s concepts.

Rossetti shows interest in women’s issues and tries to hand poems in such sensible theme as other literate comrades do. Positively, Rossetti inscribes such theme in her work not simply for her interest in the popular fictional literature but indeed her responsibility and to assert self-consciousness as an independent poetess. Besides the effects of Browning, there are other influences that might come from the members of “the Portfolio Club” (96), formed by Barbara Smith. Smith was a Victorian Feminist and one of five illegitimate children of Benjamin Leigh Smith. Herstein describes that

In “the Portfolio Club”, Barbara Smith and the members, “her sisters Nanny and Bella, Anna Mary Howitt, Bessie Parkes, and Christina Rossetti, met periodically to exhibit sketches and listen to poetry on prescribed themes” (96).
Because of poor health, Rossetti knows she cannot work outside as other feminists do. Instead she chooses to invoke the troubled treatment of women through her poems.

In this poem, Rossetti describes the relationship between mother and daughter. Being known, Rossetti’s whole life is strongly associated with her mother. It is firmly stated in many Rossetti’s biographies especially in Christina Rossetti of Mackenzie Bell and in Christina Rossetti of Georgina Battiscome and etc. In The Afterlife of Christina Rossetti, Alison Chapman identifies the relationship:

“Christina Rossetti’s close association with her mother is circulated in the biographies as the distinguish feature of her identity. Rossetti is depicted as the ideal daughter and is constantly equated with her mother” (110).

Such description in the Rossetti’s biographies usually leads Rossetti’s readers to misunderstand that Rossetti depends on her mother because of the deep relationship between them. On the contrary, I think that Rossetti fortunately has her mother’s support throughout her whole career in writing and learns much from her mother about being an independent woman without losing femininity. The relationship of Rossetti and her mother are firmly fastened and cannot be ignored. And in this poem the mother-daughter relationship is so fully expressed by Rossetti that we can study the conflicts between mother and daughter.

2. Does Femininity Mean Women’s dependence?

I do not guess his name

Who wrought my mother’s shame,
And gave me life forlorn,
But my Mother, Mother, Mother,
I know her from all other.
My Mother pale and mild,
Fair as ever was seen,
She was but scarce sixteen,
Little more than a child,
When I was born
To work her scorn.
With secret bitter throes,
In a passion of secret woes,
She bore me under the rose. (4–17)

It is unfair that women were defined in that way without a chance to choose their lives freely, particularly in the Victorian Period. The speaker proclaims her mother’s misfortune and seeks a new way for herself to live independently. Chapman goes on to say

“Rossetti’s poetry, however, does not endlessly rehearse the painful trauma of loss ... she forges a personal space that signifies the paradisal by repressing the memory of separation from the mother” (109).

Like Rossetti herself and her mother, the relationship between the young mother and the girl is strong, as Bell explains “Mrs. Rossetti survived until April 1886, and during [those] fifty-six years Christina was rarely absent from her” (6). Though in the poem the girl could curse her father for his scheme to “set his snare to catch” her mother unaware in her foolish youth, the girl tried to accept her forlorn life silently and even prayed for him sometimes.
Here, the girl praised her mother’s courage to give birth to her and rebuked her unknown father for not taking responsibility for her mother and herself. She felt grieved that her birth injured her mother’s reputation like “the keenest thorn of rose.” She loved her mother very much because she was her only child though the girl was taken away soon after her birth. The girl forgave her mother, who was so young and so helpless “but scarce sixteen/ Little more than a child” (11–12).

How sad that a mother must part from her baby or face public scorn. The mother paid a great sacrifice to give birth. When the nurse takes the baby away in order to protect the young mother from people’s defamation, the young mother feels depressed about having to separate from her new-born baby and cried:

O Nurse, let me look upon
This babe that costs so dear;
Tomorrow she will be gone:
Other mothers may keep
Their babes awake and asleep,
But I must not keep her here. (20–25)

In the Victorian Period, an unmarried woman with an illegitimate child was looked upon as a “fallen” woman and the illegitimate child was not often accepted in society. According to Rosenblum’s words,

“For a young brought up in a time that endorsed only an acceptable adult female role—that of being loved and protected by a man—the realization that this very relationship was for her impossible must have been hugely disruptive” (58).
Rossetti understandably poured her reflections on reality into her creative energies writing about women’s issues with sympathetic concern. In the above stanza, Rossetti pointed out pretty clearly the woman’s passive position. How sorrowful the decision for a mother. She could not keep her baby as other mothers did but had no choice but to accept sending her baby away.

The heroine spends her “childish” time without caring about her secret birth.

Whether I know or guess,  
I know this not the less.  
So I was sent away 
That none might spy the truth:  
And my childhood waxed to youth 
And I left off childish play. (26–31)

Rossetti might want to assert that all children should live equally however they are born. Children should enjoy their own childhood with innocent “childish play” whether rich or not.

My Lady at the Hall  
Is grander than they all:  
Hers is the oldest name 
In all the neighbourhood;  
But the race must die with her 
Tho’ she’s a lofty dame, 
For she’s unmarried still. (59–65)

Though Rossetti remained unmarried throughout her life, her experience working in the Highgate House of Charity, made her sensitive to the social
problems of the time and aware of many women’s sufferings caused by men. Rossetti showed her interest in such issues in “The Prince’s Progress,” though her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti didn’t agree with her writing a poem of this kind. (Christina) Rossetti dismisses her brother’s opinions. Jones explains

“Gabriel objected to the poem on the grounds that the subject matter was unsuitable for a woman, complaining in another letter that the ‘modern vicious taint’ of Elizabeth Barrett Browning is discernible in Christina’s work, referring presumably to her treatment of similar themes—the unmarried Marion Erle in Aurora Leigh—and her love of polemics” (123).

As Katherine Mayberry describes in Christina Rossetti: the Poetry of Discovery, in her letter Christina replied to her brother insisting on her own position as follows:

“[I]t may truly be urged that unless white could be black and Heaven Hell my experience (thank God) precludes me from hers, I yet don’t see why the “Poet mind” should be less able to construct her from its own inner consciousness than a hundred other unknown quantities” (82).

Rossetti respected her brother Gabriel and her brother gave much advice about her written works. In only a few of her poems did Christina insist on her own concepts against her brother’s advice. It might be said that Christina herself was conscious of her independence from the patriarchal control of her brother.

Rossetti’s own childhood was happy though “men spoke a foreign tongue/ Where we used to be/ Where I was merry and young,” (ll. 85–87) as the heroine in the poem, because both Rossetti and the heroine are “too young too
feel afraid” (l. 88). In Rossetti’s home, there were many Italian exiles who often came to visit. Bell describes

“About 1836 the family remove to 50 Charlotte Street. There, partly owning to the father’s conspicuous ability, partly to his growing celebrity as a leader of the movement in favour of Italian freedom, his house became a meeting-place of Italians, some of them exiles like himself (Gabriele Rossetti)” (7).

Based on her childhood experience, Christina wrote such passages in her poems. The Rossetti’s children used the Italian language. And from their childhood, the Rossettis lived in two cultures between the mother tongue English and the patrilineal tongue Italian. The Rossettis were free in speaking and writing both Italian and English at home. That’s the reason why Rossetti’s readers can enjoy her poems which are filled with both the merry lingual expressions of Italian and the layful rhymes of English.

I was a little maid
When here we came to live
From somewhere by the sea.
Men spoke a foreign tongue,
There where we used to be
When I was merry and young,
Too young to feel afraid; (82–88)

As the girl is growing up she gradually begins to “wonder who might my parents be” (l. 112). Any child might question whether they were truly their parents’ child. Naturally the heroine begins to wonder who her parents are.
I often sat to wonder
Who might my parents be,
For I knew of something under
My simple-seeming state. (111–114)

All children feel curious about the facts of their own birth while they are
growing up. The heroine is also interested in the secrets surrounding her birth.
That’s why she is concerned about “something under/ My simple-seeming
state” (113–114). The nurse of the heroine tries hard to keep them secret
because she feels it is the best way to protect the heroine and her mother. In this
poem the patriarchal figure as a protector doesn’t exist, but the nurse acts as a
protector like a mother for both the heroine and the heroine’s mother. Like the
nurse, the maternal protector similarly shows the strong relationship between
Rossetti herself and her mother.

Nurse never talked to me
Of mother or of father,
But watched me early and late
With kind suspicious cares:
Or not suspicious, rather
Anxious, as if she knew
Some secret I might gather
And smart for unawares.
Thus I grew. (116–123)

The heroine complains about the nurse’s keeping the secret from both her and
her mother. Everything seems to be going smoothly. The secret remains beyond
the reach of people’s ears. Time flies like an arrow. The heroine grows up and
the nurse becomes old, weak, and is dying.

Though the nurse is dying, she keeps the secret to the end of her life without saying a word to the heroine, but leaves her the “ring” a symbol linked with the girl and her mother.

She gave a ring to me
Of gold wrought curiously,
A ring which she had worn
Since the day that I was born,
She once had said to me:
I slipped it on my finger; (133–138)

Unfortunately, the girl’s nurse dies. She is left alone. She feels lonely, miserable and depressed. The girl lives hopelessly.

The one who loved was gone.
How long I stayed alone
With the corpse, I never knew,
For I fainted dead as stone (143–146)

In “Reparative Strategies” of Christina Rossetti, Mayberry describes how Rossetti’s ballads show her feelings and how she constructed “positive gain out of pain and deprivation” (58). Rossetti’s poems often express a sadness of loss. In other words, Rossetti describes the sadness of loss to her readers and encourages them to adopt brand-new emotions in living to face their sadness.

When I came to life once more
I was down upon the floor,
With neighbours making ado
To bring me back to life. (147–150)

With her neighbours’ help, the heroine recovers strength despite her sadness. Here Rossetti wants to suggest the importance of independence. That’s why she says “I was down upon the floor/ when I came to life once more” (147–148). Rossetti encourages her readers to stand their ground independently. Another message that Rossetti wants to represent is that humans are not alone in the world. That’s why the heroine could survive “With neighbours making ado/ To bring [her] back to life” (149–150). Rossetti herself struggled with financial, health and writing problems in youth. Luckily thanks for her mother’s support, Rossetti succeeded to overcome her problems and continued writing throughout her life. That’s why she shows strong concern for the theme of women’s suffering.

For days day after day
On my weary bed I lay
Wishing the time would pass;
Oh, so wishing that I was
Likely to pass away:
For the one friend whom I knew
Was dead, I knew no other,
Neither father nor mother;
And I, what should I do? (164–172)

“And I, what should I do” (172), the heroine worried. Humans feel confused when they are alone. In youth, Rossetti felt no confidence in writing for a living, her confused emotions could be seen in her prose fiction “Maude”. But Rossetti
ventured from such destructive despair. After she published “Goblin Market” and “Sing Song” Rossetti gained a reputation for writing and confidenced in her writing too. According to Mayberry’s view, Rossetti’s poems express

“the creativity born of loss provides, not a refuge from the truth, but a means for discovering a deeper, invaluable truth about the speaker’s own power and worth” (82).

Thus, a new happiness emerges from despair. This realization of the power of truth guides the girl in the poem to rebirth. And the lady, the girl’s mother, come to visit her when she hears from the sexton of the nurse’ death. They meet each other.

While I stared, My lady took
My hand in her spare hand
Jewelled and soft and grand,
And looked with a long long look
Of hunger in my face;
As if she tried to trace
Features she ought to know,
And half hoped, half feared, to find. (238–245)

The lady is gentle and merciful though they have been parted from each other since the girl’s birth. The tie between mother and daughter is fastened strongly and unchanged like the ring, though the girl can not be sure whether the woman is her mother or not. The girl dreams of having a complete family, an ordinary happy family.
So pleasant in a dream:
A home such as I see
My blessed neighbours live in
With father and with mother
All proud of one another,
Named by one common name
From baby in the bud
To full-blown workman father;
It’s little short of Heaven. (458–466)

In the fairy story, a charming prince is always provided for the beautiful girl. In real life, what should we expect? I think, particular in the conventional consideration, most people only dream and expect to have an ideal family in which a father and a mother live under the same roof though it is with “one common name” though the father might be a mere workman without a wealthy estate. Certainly, the girl begins to expect a complete family after the lady promises to provide her with money when she gets married. In the end, however, she realizes it was not possible for an illegitimate child to find an ideal husband even if she is rich. If she tries to discover the secret of her birth, she thinks that she will hurt her mother much as the “keenest thorn of a rose”. She decides to live alone, nameless to save her mother. I think while Rossetti wrote the narrative poem she was conscious of the Victorian Feminism Movements. Especially, Rossetti was influenced by her friend Barbara Smith and their discussion concerning Smith’s club of “Caroline Norton’s marital difficulties”. Herstein interprets: “The illegitimate child could not inherit except by bequest, having no legal claim to family property or surname (73)”. Rossetti was so concerned that she wrote about “fallen women” and illegitimate children. Does she support the Feminism Movement?
3. Is Feminism Equal to Women’s Independence

My lady, you might trust
Your daughter with your fame.
Trust me, I would not shame
Our honourable name,
For I have noble blood
Tho’ I was bred in dust
And brought up in the mud.
I will not press my claim,
Just leave me where you will:
But you might trust your daughter
For blood is thicker than water
And you’re my mother still. (383–394)

The feelings expressed in this poem arose from the failure of love to offer a new power to her life. In *The Demon & the Damozel*, Suzan M. Maldman explains “A consistent theme in Christina Rossetti’s writing is the desire to submit the self to a greater will” (38). The feelings are a significant feature of Rossetti’s poems. Some critics say Rossetti’s poems are “dark” poems, called by Maldman, I prefer the encouragement hidden in Rossetti’s “dark” poems that she tries to express and wants to offer to her readers. And Maldman praises Rossetti’s “darker poems provide a warning that the subject must carefully discriminate between different opportunities for submission, entrusting one’s fate to only the most meritorious authorities” (38). Mayberry interprets the feature as

“The act of turning her experiences into poetry enabled Rossetti to achieve
desperately needed distance from her difficult discoveries about the role of love in her life. But, as we shall see, she needed more distance from this truth than she could gain from poetically representing it” (58).

And the invisible energy hidden in Rossetti’s poems will lead her readers to a rebirth. Rossetti’s poem let her readers share the bitterness of the heroine and experience the renunciation pouring out from despair. Rosenblum comments:

“At the end of the poem the heroine (the daughter and the narrator) has experienced a renunciation that refined and defines a self: She stands ‘nameless,’ a free spirit, undefined except by the limits of mortality. The illegitimate daughter, then, is the ‘answer’ to the repining princess: the only power of women resides outside the framework of patriarchy” (142).

The girl decides to live independently and starts a life on her own. She cries:

I think my mind is fixed
On one point and made up:
To accept my lot unmixed;
Never to drug the cup
But drink it by myself.
I’ll not blot out my shame
With any man’s good name;
But nameless as I stand,
My hand is my own hand,
And nameless as I came
I go to the dark land. (530–541)
4. Conclusion

An ideal family might make a woman happy. The heroine knows that the name of a noble mother could provide her a happy and proud family that she and her mother could respect. Her birth secrets will be exposed, however, and it may hurt her mother much and make her mother lose all her possessions. The feminists assert that the protection of father or mother would be a resistant element to prevent a female from achieving independence. It is an important element for a girl to gain her happiness not by depending on a male by marriage but to live as an independent individual. This concept is also clearly expressed in the poem.

Common sense, especially in the Victorian period, society insists that a woman should be satisfied only by money or by a romantic and ideal marriage. But the way an independent girl should live is totally different. Rossetti realized it and concentrated on writing about women's issues. It is a different way of life that Rossetti tried to offer to her readers. Mayberry analyzed this theme in Rossetti's poetry when she wrote

"Unquestionably, Rossetti recognized and made use of the distancing and reshaping properties of art; she was aware that writing poetry about the painful conditions of her life changed those conditions, gave them a quality comfortably distinct from their real essence. Pain—disordered, shapeless, intolerable—is not preserved in a poem as much as it is changed, ordered, reduced into a manageable shape" (58).

Like Rossetti herself, the girl could also maintain a calm spirit, face her bitterness, and live bravely with a new energy from rebirth. In other words, it is the girl's mind that decides to live independent, in other words. The heroine
"All equal in the grave"—
I bide my time till then:
"All equal before God"—
Today I feel His rod,
Tomorrow He may save:
Amen. (542–546)

Such women's issues also can be sensed like "Goblin Market" of sisterly love, "The Prince's Progress" of Princess waiting for her belated lovely prince, "Convent Threshold", etc. Mayberry praises

"For Rossetti and speakers of her poems, solitude allowed, indeed required, alternative creations. For Rossetti, the creations were poetry and autonomy; for the speakers of her poems, the creations were dreams, fantasies, hopes, memories, self-love, personal strength" (83).

Today, our society may still treat many girls and women unfairly but tomorrow may be better. Mayberry explains "Through the transforming properties inherent in memory, fantasy, anticipation, and fiction, Rossetti creates something new and positive out of love's failure" (58). Rossetti tried to express an independent spirit, to encourage women to resist romantic expectations, and to face reality. When reading Rossetti's poems, her readers often find an invisible power emerging to cheer them up. This is why her poems are still read today.
Notes and Works Cited

Bell, Mackenzie, *Christina Rossetti*, Hurst and Blackett, 1898.