



Images in the Poetry of D. G. Rossetti

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ABSTRACT

Rossetti, no doubt, has claimed the attention of many writers. Rossetti was different from most other poets as he expressed himself in two media - poetry and painting, and he attained a certain standard in both. The study of imagery has been accepted in the present age as a valuable method of approach to literary criticism. The analysis of imagery helps in the appreciation of a poet's work by providing insight into the sensory details that give a concrete shape to a poet's world of imagination. Analysis of Rossetti's imagery would, therefore, contribute to a critical assessment of his achievement as a poet. No doubt, his poems are limited in range. He was not as prolific as Tennyson or Browning. The limited range of poems, however, does not necessarily detract from the variety or value of Rossetti's imagery. A clear impression can be obtained of Rossetti's poetic imagination by examining the images from different angles.

Keywords: Images, vision, shape, idea

Main text

Rossetti portrays the subtle nuances of love and his view of the diverse themes through innumerable images. The dimension of Rossetti's creative vision is, therefore, wide, the thematic contents of his poems finding expression through his prismatic imagination.

At the same time, the variety of images does not rule out coherence. Definite imagistic forms can be traced in the portrayal of specific themes by assembling images from different poems. These generally assume human shapes and provide insight into the deep inspiration underlying Rossetti's personification of abstract concepts. The personification of themes which figured frequently in mediaeval moral allegory, was also resorted to by Keats whom Rossetti admired. Rossetti's adoption of this technique, therefore, might have been derivative. But Rossetti's definite vision of human shapes in relation to themes such as Love, Life, Death, Beauty etc., indicates that personification was not merely a borrowed or superficial technique to him. It was inspired by his own vivid artistic imagination. When *Lady Beauty* is envisaged in the sonnet *Soul's Beauty*, without stopping at simple personification, Rossetti proceeds to add dynamic qualities of the "flying hair" and "fluttering hem" of Beauty. In other sonnets of *The House of Life* e.g., "The Portrait", "Her Gifts" and "Body's Beauty", detailed descriptions of Rossetti's concept of beauty may be traced. Moreover, the artistic medium provided another outlet for Rossetti's rich imagination. Paintings such as *Beata Beatrix* and *La Pia*, in addition to revealing "literary overtones" of Dante, give expression to Rossetti's imaginative vision of beauty. Thus Personification, a simple form of imagery, had a vital significance to Rossetti, as he identified his ideas with vivid concrete shapes, both in his poems and in his paintings.

Analysis of the texture of Rossetti's sense-imagery points to the numerical predominance and qualitative excellence of visual images. This is not unnatural, as Rossetti like Blake, had the distinction of being a poet as well as a painter. Watts-Dunton's statement, quoted in the "Introduction" (p.5) showed how Rossetti thought in pictures. In this study the nature of Rossetti's visual imagination has been further demonstrated. It is evident that Rossetti is equally capable of painting panoramic views and minute details. Rossetti is capable of envisaging the "sheer depth" of space dotted with the earth and the moon from the point of the *Rampart of God's house*. In contrast to this vast space-dimension, Rossetti paints the minute details of the "spiral-tongues" of leaves changing colour in different seasons. These images can easily stand the test of comparison with what Fogle depicts as Shelley's "panoramic" vision and Keats's "minute" observation. Moreover, Rossetti is able to modify visual images to suit contextual requirements. The clarity of certain images is remarkable, while the blurred images in *Love's Nocturn* create an atmosphere exactly in keeping with the requirements of a dream world.

Another significant point emerging from the study of Rossetti's visual imagery is the highly effective use of chiaroscuro and colour images. The light and shadow images are used with deep emotional implication. Strife and anguish are vividly described in the third stanza with the pitiless eyes of Fate staring relentlessly at man. The heart of love is shown as bleeding in the fourth stanza:

What of the heart of love
That bleeds in thy breast, O Man?
Thy kisses snatched 'neath the ban
Of fangs that mock them above;

But apart from the use of the word "fangs" in this version there is no reference to the snake-image which predominates in the stanzas in Rossetti's letter. The stanzas given in the letter describe a deadly struggle with a snake which is representative of man's strife in this universe. Some perish in the struggle, yet the struggle is not entirely futile. The imprint of man's efforts is left in the world for coming generations to see. The fourth stanza suggests a strange idea - it envisages each life being "furled" in new flesh, and the consequences of a man's actions being felt again by himself. To an Indian reader this idea appears to be akin to the Indian concept of reincarnation- a chained cycle of existences of the soul, each existence linked to the others by karma; i.e., the consequences of action. How Rossetti came by this idea is difficult to understand, but it is interesting to link this finding to Rossetti's description of Eternity as "the snake's coil". The snake-image is extremely vivid, but so overpowering in this case that it overshadows the main idea of the poem. Therefore, Rossetti decided wisely in refraining from this modification.

This analysis of Rossetti's imagery is, thus, a step in the direction of a comprehensive reassessment of his poetry. It is an attempt to enquire into the variety, coherence, nature, depth and function of Rossetti's images.

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