SYMBOLIST PAINTING THE PRE-RAPHAELITE BROTHERHOOD

Rarely have life and art sought to imitate each other so closely as in the lives of the Preraphaelite women. As models, wives and lovers to the P.R. artists, women such as Elizabeth Siddal and Jane Morris among the others, were the inspiration at the very core of the movement. Portrayed as saints and bohemians, nubile maidens and angelic wives, fallen women and sirens, symbols of death and courtly ladies from a rediscovered medieval world, women attained an idealized and elevated position in the lives and works of the Brotherhood. Painted with meticulous attention to detail and heavy with symbolic meaning, these images of femininity both reflected and shaped the roles of women in Victorian society. In reality, the P:R: women, who were often the objects of the artists’ infatuations and desires, were plucked from ordinary, often squalid existences and their lives transformed through their relationships with the PR. Painters.

The painting of PR women starts with poetry. Key texts from English Romanticism inspired the young PR artists. The first of these poetic texts were J. Keats’s “La Belle Dame….” And “The Eve of Saint Agnes” with their dreamy sensual atmospheres. Keats’s influence as a poet of love and romance was taken up by A. Tennyson, whose “Lady of Shalott” gave the PRs another haunting, almost obsessional theme. The opposed but complementary aspects of womanhood - sexuality and sanctity – represent the image of the female as defined in Victorian society. Woman as desirable, woman as chaste, woman as dutiful, woman as witch: these are among the images that reflected and shaped the ideas of the age and that were portrayed in PR paintings.

As artists, the women were less clearly successful than the male PR painters and poets, as images, however, they dominate the scene. There are 3 main types of PR icons. The 1st and earliest type is the fair, simple, modest maiden with her innocent attractions, the 2nd is the proud, golden beauty similar to later “sex goddesses”, the third and most important is the dark, enigmatic siren or femme fatale, who represents the fin de siècle idea of the eternal beauty.

John, Everett Millais: Ophelia 1852

1. What is the link between image and content? Are they paralleled or contrasted?

2. What are the flowers floating with Ophelia a symbol of? (pansies, violets, poppies, forget-me-
1. This painting was inspired by Dante’s Vita Nuova And portrayed Beatrice at the moment of her transition From earth to heaven, it was Rossetti’s tribute to his wife. What does the sitter’s expression symbolize?
2. What is the bird a symbol of?
3. What is it dropping into her hands?
4. What is there on the left and on the right of the sitter? What do they represent?

D.G. Rossetti  Proserpine 1873 – 77

1. P. is presented as a creature of winter, the death of Natural growth and darkness. Where is she? What is she holding in her hand?
2. In the background a branch of ivy and a gleam of light on the wall are painted. What do they represent?
1. Also this story is derived from Dante. Pia is imprisoned by a cruel husband in a fortress where she dies of despair and disease. What feeling does the expression on her face convey?
2. Where is Pia portrayed? What is there next to her?
3. Her thumb and forefinger are playing with something. What? What is it a symbol of?

John William Waterhouse, The Lady of Shalott, 1894