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Portrait of a Prostitute:  
A Feminist Analysis of The Victorian Sex Worker in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Art and Literature

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the  
Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

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## Introduction

Throughout the entirety of a woman's life, value will be assigned to her based on a male perception of her physical appearance and lifestyle. While this statement has reigned relevant and consistent for centuries, the varying factors that determine these values are everchanging. The standards imposed onto a woman to ensure her value in the eyes of men reflect the cultural norms and societal ideals of the era she belongs to. For Victorian women, this meant maintaining purity and respectability at all costs. Starting with their attire, their bodies were enclosed in layers of fabric and metal boning that warped their silhouettes to fit into a restrictive idea of beauty fashioned for the male gaze. Under the shackles of tightly laced corsets and petticoats, the wealthiest of women were forced to view themselves through a male lens to secure their eligibility to marry. Poor women were dealt a worse hand, as they couldn't afford expensive garments and therefore had to make up for their lack of visual perfection through their knowledge of household chores and obligations while maintaining employment in the meantime. Some women, though, opted out of this traditional routine, either by choice or necessity. These women, in some way or another, went against purity— whether they were single mothers of bastard children or fully-fledged streetwalkers. The latter made up one of the most oppressed and misunderstood groups of people of their time. Seeking survival or a self-governed life, these fallen women were often unable to achieve either one. For those with such a popular and frequently utilized profession, they were denoted as dirty, downtrodden, and disease-ridden and had their independence infringed on through the implication of targeted laws. The daily ails of the female sex worker would serve as inspiration for many, mostly male, writers and artists who sought to envelop their work in melancholy and mystique. Their identities would be molded to

suit what a male visionary hoped to convey, making it so that women are unable to escape limitations even in a fictional realm.

The appeal of prostitutes as subjects of written and visual art is not their profession itself, but their place in society due to their profession. Sex work was utilized by many men but looked down upon by all. These were women who opposed established gender roles by assigning value to their own bodies despite their impurity. Though many female sex workers lived in poverty, they achieved some sort of token for their fallenness by getting paid by each client. While their status of “fallen”, which could have been assigned to them long before they began their occupation, remains the same with each man and cannot be changed or reversed, each sex act they perform provides them with physical compensation. The monetary payment as a result of this financial transaction is a tangible representation of the woman’s worth that she can use to assign her own value to herself.

Despite their deplorable reputation in the conservative eyes of Victorians, prostitutes became the subject of numerous literary pieces and visual artworks. The comparison between characterizations of the sex worker by male writers versus female writers highlights the distinct intentions of both genders. The prestigious Pre-Raphaelite writer and artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti exhibits a dramatic presentation of his male savior complex in both his poem “Jenny” and his painting “Found”, along with its accompanying poem. Rossetti’s narrator in “Jenny” broadcasts his male guilt in order to take accountability, which in turn bolsters the writer’s ego by portraying himself as “one of the good ones”: a man who demonstrates awareness of male contribution to female depravity. The male narrator is given absolute command of the prostitute Jenny’s entire story and identity, and she does not speak a single line in the poem. “Found” depicts a decrepit yet aesthetically beautiful prostitute in poor health and spirits being attended to

by a male bystander, who positions himself above her in her fragile state. In contrast, feminist writer Augusta Webster provides her prostitute speaker, Eulalie, with a voice that allows her to articulate how agency plays a role in her work as a fairly successful sex worker, as well as to point out the glaring flaws and hypocrisies that poisoned Victorian society. As Rossetti's speaker reflected the writer's self-seeking desire for improvement while simultaneously objectifying women, Webster's speaker displayed qualities of an unflinching advocate for female liberation and unity. By comparing the work of these two writers, the distinction between male and female ideas of sympathy for sex workers can be perceived. One can observe that while female feminist writers such as Webster utilize the figure of the sex worker to incite critical conversations about gender roles and culture, the work of male writers such as Rossetti reinforces the harmful stereotypes that these women seek to undo.

In order to contextualize the poetry and visual artwork that this essay will be focusing on, it is crucial to examine non-artistic opinions surrounding female prostitution. Despite the widespread use of sex work services by men of all walks of life, the topic was often kept under wraps to avoid vulgarity. However, there were a few male scholars who were willing to analyze the subject and present their ideas regarding whether or not these fallen women can or should be included in, or acknowledged by, Victorian society. Even the more progressive-leaning theories brought forth by these thinkers were veiled with harmful sexist notions and ideals that had the potential to endanger women to an arguably greater degree than their taboo profession. To gain an understanding of the state of sex work-centered discussions that were occurring while Webster and Rossetti mused the female prostitute, we will assess the viewpoints of William Acton and W.R. Greg.

Though it was most common to completely denounce fallen women as broken and irredeemable, a doctor named William Acton took a contrasting stance in his *Report on Prostitution* (1857). Risking criticism and controversy, Acton defends the women that had been cast away by society and even advocated for their rehabilitation, writing, “I have every reason to believe, that by far the larger number of women who have resorted to prostitution for a livelihood, return sooner or later to a more or less regular course of life” (39). Alleging that a fallen woman still has the potential to fulfill her role as a traditional wife and mother, he flips the Victorian standard of femininity on its head and rejects the established system of determining female validity. Additionally, his statement calls upon men to welcome a redeemed fallen woman into their homes and lives, protesting the notion that her past actions make her inherently worthless. When discussing the eligibility of prostitutes to marry and bear children, Acton specifies that the “better inclined” class of prostitutes have the potential to become “wedded wives” (40). The characteristics that define this class were not listed but based on sanitary concerns that were heavily prevalent in London at the time, it can be inferred that being free of venereal diseases was one of them. By challenging the stereotype that all prostitutes were infected, in this way Acton minimizes the public’s disgust and aversion towards them.

Along with providing his opinion regarding the fallen woman’s opportunity for societal redemption, Acton also stressed the importance of “recognition” – or acknowledging the existence of sex work and sex workers for regulating purposes. Disease is one of the “evils of prostitution” that Acton insists can be “softened” through “recognition of prostitution by the State, and the adoption of remedial and preventative measures” (Acton xii). With the Contagious Diseases Act of 1866 in effect, any woman suspected of being a prostitute was to be subjected to internal examinations by a police officer. Essentially state-enforced sexual assault, this law was

far from an ideal method of preventing the spread of disease and likely put countless women, sex workers or otherwise, in harm's way. While Acton emphasized a woman's right to engage in prostitution as it is her personal choice, he quickly contradicts this defense of bodily autonomy by justifying the Contagious Diseases Act:

Regret it as we may, we cannot but admit that a woman if so disposed may make profit of her own person and that the State has no right to prevent her. It has a right, however, in my opinion, to insist that she shall not, in trafficking with her person, become a medium of communicating disease, and that, as she has given herself up to an occupation dangerous to herself and others, she must, in her own interest and that of the community, submit to supervision. (Acton x-xi)

Focusing solely on cleansing the prostitute, here Acton fails to foresee the potential dangers of permitting such exams for both prostitutes and civilian women. What classified the grounds of suspicion that would lead a woman to being checked out by an officer? How would such exams be safely conducted, protecting both the female being examined and the officer? Would officers receive some form of medical training in order to be able to identify specific symptoms of venereal diseases? These are all questions that make sense to ask as a contemporary reader, but unfortunately none were necessarily considered by Acton in his report. Seeking "to make the evil that we cannot repress as little injurious as possible" (Acton xi), he overlooks the glaring issues that come with setting this precedent.

Aside from selling sex, female sexual promiscuity in general was considered a severe moral illness, which Acton touches upon as well. He states, "many forcible divines and moralists have maintained that all illicit intercourse is prostitution, and that the word is justly applicable as those of 'fornication' and 'whoredom' to the female who, whether for hire or not, voluntarily

surrenders her virtue” (Acton 1). Acknowledging that there were broad terms that defined a woman’s supposed risk to those around her, Acton proves that he understands that women can be scrutinized for any sexual expression at all. Whether a fallen women engaged in sexual acts with just one “illicit” partner or hundreds, she was perceived as practically an equal threat to the health, safety, and moral wellbeing of society. Therefore, the term “prostitute” or “streetwalker” is very broadly defined, and many women could fall in this category. One might also question whether or not this negative perception would cause a woman to want to withdraw from her lifestyle or fall even further into it, as she has already been disparaged by her community. While stressing the concept of redemption to potentially minimize public aggression towards females who have “fallen”, Acton seems to accept that many will continue to reject them after their first act of debauchery.

In contrast with Acton’s proposal of recognition and redemption, writer W.R. Greg presents his 1853 essay titled “The Great Sin of Great Cities”, in which he concludes that the acknowledgement of sex work could be potentially ruinous to society. Greg states, “Finally, it is urged that the ‘tacit sanction’ given to vice by such a recognition of prostitution as would be involved in a system of supervision, registration, or license, would be a greater evil than all the maladies (moral and physical) which now flow from its unchecked prevalence” (40). From this, it can be drawn that the downside of regulation according to Greg was being forced to face the prevalence of sin in society, and most importantly, the fact that men play a large role in facilitating it. By utilizing the services of sex workers, men engage in this “evil” even more so than the prostitutes themselves. Aware of the risk of taking home a sexually transmitted disease to their families, they remain willing to set aside this concern for a brief period of pleasure and excitement. By expressing his desire to repress cognizance of prostitution, Greg reveals a degree



of shame felt towards members of his community and his sex. He may also be getting at what Acton failed to consider: the fact that regulation of female sex workers could foster corruption in the police force, with officers encouraged to stop and assault any woman they deem to be a “whore”.

Interestingly, while Greg argues against recognition largely due to his perceived reluctance to live under a government that acknowledges male participation in acts of immorality, he directly addresses the male role in a woman’s “fall”, writing “Women’s desires scarcely ever lead to their fall; for (...) the desire scarcely exists in a definite and conscious form, till they have fallen” (10). Here, Greg establishes his belief that women do not have control over their own bodies and are not solely responsible for their sexual status, directly calling out his fellow men for allowing their uncontrolled urges to facilitate the “ruining” of women. Separating himself from these men, he attributes them with having a bestial and inhuman quality driving them to avoid moral customs in pursuit of temporary physical satisfaction. Greg writes,

We have said that fornication reduces the most fervent expression of deep and devoted human love to a mere animal gratification. But it does more than this: it not only brings man down to a level with the brutes, but it has one feature which places him far, far below them. Sexual connexion, with them, is the simple indulgence of a natural desire *mutually felt*: in the case of human prostitution, it is in many, probably in most instances, a brutal desire on the one side only, and a reluctant and loathing submission, purchased by money, on the other (3).

Placing the fault on men for failing to repress their impulses and avoid the solicitation of sex work, the essayist recognizes that prostitution would not exist without willing participants who value sex workers enough to financially compensate them for their services. Here, Greg seems to

concede that sexual desire will always be a universal aspect of the human experience. He later detests this, though, indicating his belief that sexual desire does not inherently exist in females and must be incited: “In men, in general, the sexual desire is inherent and spontaneous, and belongs to the condition of puberty. In the other sex, the desire is dormant, if not non-existent, till excited; always till excited by undue familiarities; almost always till excited by actual intercourse” (10). Distinguishing what he believes to be a clear contrast between the two sexes, Greg suggests that sexuality is completely separate from femininity, therefore creating a direct association with sexual promiscuity and masculinity. Whether it was his intention or not, Greg insinuates that men, to a great degree, can be blamed for a woman’s fall.

Maintaining his position that the sin of sex work should be largely concealed by polite society, Greg does also discuss the possibility of reinstating fallen women as acceptable members of their community. Previously focusing on highlighting the male role in female ruining, Greg pivots and reinforces the idea that it is a woman’s responsibility to demonstrate her worthiness to men according to Victorian constructs. Specifically, he places this duty in the hands of female victims of seduction:

If the poor girl can induce or compel the man who has betrayed her to swear a lie of fidelity to her at the altar,—if she can bind to her by legal process a libertine who, being bound against his will, is certain to hate her or abuse her,—if, having committed the one pitiable folly of yielding to an unworthy deceiver, she is willing to commit the still more monstrous folly of putting her whole future fate in his hands after his unworthiness has been made manifest—then, on that hard condition, and on that only, can her character be whitewashed. (21)

Though he recognizes this condition, Greg is by no means satisfied with the solution that society has laid out. Rather, he asserts that forcing women to associate their value with men who have violated their purity in order to be granted readmission into their community is an unfortunate responsibility, as such men are sure to continue to corrupt her life. According to Greg, women are incapable of experiencing inherent sexual desire and making their own decisions regarding their body and sex life. This greatly contrasts with Acton's perspective, as he attests to the women's ability to make her own choices and encourages marriage with their seducers. Greg's statement, on the other hand, identifies a fault in the concept of redemption that Acton avidly proposed: that men who decide to be with a ruined woman must possess some sort of glaring character flaw that will result in her mistreatment and suffering.

While Acton and Greg both include, to some degree, forward-thinking ideologies concerning sex work, they do not do so without exhibiting a clear male bias. Acton believes prostitutes can find a meaningful place within their community, but only by fulfilling a traditional feminine role as a wife and mother after her worth is determined by a male suitor. He defends a woman's right to utilize her own body for profit, but not without invasive regulations enforced by unchecked institutions. Rossetti's perspective conflicts with Acton's concept of redemption, as he insists that prostitutes will always fall victim to a tragic fate and view themselves as utterly doomed beyond help. Webster's prostitute speaker in "A Castaway" rejects redemption, arguing that she would not fit into the everyday Victorian woman's role, as experience within her profession has disillusioned the system of marriage. As Acton entrusts men in power to ensure the safety of prostitutes through examinations, Webster's speaker would thoroughly protest this, as she blatantly calls out male-led organizations that are pervaded by corruption. Greg enables men who sin, despite his awareness of the harm they cause, by

advocating for a government that fails to acknowledge male wrongdoing by implicating laws and penalties that would affect them. Like Rossetti, he recognizes a problem rooted in his own gender, but takes no direct action to defend his community from injurious men. Webster's poem contends that Greg and many other Victorians condone the desecration of society at the hands of abusive men in power by refusing to hold them accountable. The masculine-centered perspectives provided by Acton, Greg, and other educated Victorian men remained at the forefront of discussions surrounding sex work, while the voices of actual sex workers were highly suppressed.

## Chapter 1: Silencing of the Sex Worker in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Jenny"

While Acton and Greg disclosed their opinions on sex work and female sexuality in their essays, artists and writers belonging to the Romantic and Pre-Raphaelite movement contributed even more to such discussions. One of the most influential members of these movements, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, provided a unique perspective on the issue in his poem "Jenny". Centered around a young male scholar's assumptions about the life and future of a female prostitute, "Jenny" is a peak example of male creatives using the fallen woman as a device in their writing. In this case, Jenny opens a window into the mind of a young and educated man as he speculates about her life and feelings. As Rossetti's speaker tries to connect with the misery he perceives in Jenny, he divulges his male guilt which resonates heavily with the ideas in Greg's essay. Similar to Greg, Rossetti's speaker makes attempts to separate himself from the rest of the male gender by referring to Jenny's other clients in a disparaging light, implying that they are to blame for her woes. The speaker also portrays himself as a male savior, which can be compared to the attitude of Acton. Both men attempt to moralize the fallen women: the "Jenny" narrator does so by attempting to analyze her character and sympathize with her by gazing at her sleeping body, while Acton suggests the redemption of prostitutes, indicating his belief that they can still become worthy members of their community. Along with "Jenny", Rossetti's painting *Found* and its accompanying sonnet deal with the same themes of sex work, male guilt, and the male savior complex. Through his aestheticization of sex workers in his literature and art, Rossetti controls their narrative through his own lens, manipulating their vulnerability and bolstering himself by displaying a degree of sympathy.

Originally drafted in 1849, "Jenny" went through a series of intensive revisions until it reached its major publication in Rossetti's 1870 book, *Poems*. Cycling through alterations for yet

another decade, the work remained easy to attack due to its bold subject matter. Rossetti's lyrical piece deals with grim themes such as abandonment and suicide, as Jenny is assigned a bleak outlook by the contemplative narrator. Eight years prior to the publishing of *Poems*, Elizabeth Siddal, the adored yet forlorn wife to Rossetti, passed away as the result of a drug overdose following the death of her newborn son. Unable to cope with the loss of her child, Siddal's addiction spiraled out of control in her deep depression. Considering Rossetti's personal experience witnessing female melancholy and despair, it is unsurprising that this topic would appear frequently in his paintings and poetry. Incidentally, Rossetti was responsible for both Siddal's ruining and redemption, maintaining a sexual relationship with his lover long before their wedding. Had Rossetti failed to follow through with marrying Siddal, she could have easily lapsed into the same cycle as the fallen women in Rossetti's writing and art. The image of a fallen woman that the reader can visualize from reading the lines of "Jenny" can be juxtaposed with Rossetti's unfinished 1854 painting, *Found*, and the sonnet that accompanies it. Both the lines within "Jenny" and the composition of *Found* allow readers and viewers of Rossetti's work to better understand the male thought process and attitudes towards women during the nineteenth century, especially sex workers and lower-class women. What "Jenny" serves to represent is Rossetti's realization of the failure of man to extricate women from the detrimental situations brought onto them due to their place in society as a result of their sex.

To give a brief overview of the poem, "Jenny" begins with the narrator, an educated male, contemplating on a prostitute's thoughts and dreams as she falls asleep upon his knee. The narrator internally explains his current situation and how he ended up in Jenny's room. He expresses pity for Jenny due to his assumptions that she is illiterate and feeble-minded. As he indulges in his own male gaze while describing Jenny's physical appearance, the speaker makes

a point to separate himself from the other men who pay for her services by verbally depicting them as rowdy, drunken, and abusive men who seek to take advantage of her. Picturing Jenny wandering alone through the city streets, the narrator then alludes to the amplified suffering of Jenny as she ages, portraying her perceived shame as a public spectacle. Hinting at the possibility of a death by suicide for the woman, the young man ponders on the idea of speaking these thoughts to Jenny herself before concluding that she would be unable to comprehend the significance behind his words due to the deteriorated state of her mind. As the speaker continues to jump to conclusions about Jenny's intellect, emotional complexity, personal aspirations and fate, Jenny remains silent throughout the entirety of the poem. Her identity is constructed through a male lens, making Jenny a stagnant and static character. The narrator further debases her by leaving money in her hair, romanticizing his participation in sex work while simultaneously objectifying the sex worker.

In much of the scholarly work centered around "Jenny", there is a pertinent focus on both gender and Rossetti's idea of the "inner-standing point". D.M.R Bentley explores the concept of the "inner-standing point" in detail, defining it as the capability of a reader or a viewer of a work of art "to be absorbed or immersed in [the characters and situations] (and their 'frame of reference') more fully than is the case with the experiences denoted by the terms 'pity' and 'sympathy'" (682). Bentley goes on to examine how Rossetti uses the narrator's description of Jenny to engross the reader in the same abstract perception of her that the speaker engages in. Bristow builds on this notion in his article discussing the silence of Jenny and the privileging of the young male narrator's speech. Both scholars reference Robert Buchanan's criticism of the poem in his 1871 essay, "The Fleshly School of Poetry", in which Buchanan exhibits an essentially Victorian perspective and remarks that male verse writers are "intellectual

hermaphrodites” with hyper-fixations on physicality and aestheticism. Specifically looking at Rossetti’s reference to the “fiery serpent” (154), Rivers combines a typological and topographical interpretation of the symbolism in “Jenny” in his essay. Using the work of Bracebridge Hemyng to provide important context about the history of “park prostitutes”, Rivers deals with society’s degradation of the female sex worker, often leading to tragic suicides in Hyde Park’s notorious Serpentine Lake. Taking a unique approach to the text, Roe looks through a material lens in her discussion of Rossetti’s metaphorical use of glass objects. She theorizes that the glass items within “Jenny”, such as mirrors and windows, represent portals of exchange.

Though scholars have investigated the relationship between “Jenny” and gender, the male projection of guilt onto Jenny has not been fully explored. Rossetti’s speaker uses Jenny as a tabula rasa to imprint his internal moral and existential anxieties onto, allowing his fictional version of her to suffer from the consequences of a stained character. By using a fallen woman as the outlet for the narrator’s distress, Rossetti depicts the female as naïve and less complex than her male counterpart. At the same time, the speaker ironically fails to realize his own hypocrisy and presumptuousness while commenting on Jenny’s lack of intelligence and self-awareness. The narrator of the poem removes himself from contrition by placing the fault onto both Jenny and other men for contributing to what he portrays as the atrophy of her soul. As the speaker indirectly denies his contribution to the patriarchal oppression of women, he views himself as a protector and imagines Jenny’s gratitude towards his supposed benevolence: “perhaps you’re merely glad / That I’m not drunk or ruffianly / And let you rest upon my knee” (Rossetti, “Jenny” 64-66). The narrator’s decision to voice his feelings into an empty void speaks to his guilty conscience. He is subconsciously aware that despite the fact that he does not physically assault the sex worker or threaten her with violence, he is an active participant in her perceived



ruination. By examining the ways in which Rossetti's speaker dodges accountability and formulates his own image of Jenny, we can draw meaningful conclusions regarding male attitudes towards female suffering in the nineteenth century.

Following the publication of *Poems*, descriptions of lust and superficial female beauty in Rossetti's work made his book an easy target for criticism. Though prostitution was far from uncommon during the time of the collection's debut, the discussion of anything related to sex and sexuality was considered intolerable in the eyes of unsullied Victorians. A glimpse of this mindset can be seen in Robert Buchanan's essay, "The Fleshly School of Poetry", in which he denounces Rossetti's poetic and artistic merit. Buchanan's idea of "fleshliness" was the primary focus of his attack against Rossetti, as he marked with disgust the poet's references to female physicality and the interactions between lovers. Buchanan writes,

Here is a full-grown man, presumably intelligent and cultivated, putting on record for other full-grown men to read, the most secret mysteries of sexual connection, and that with so sickening a desire to reproduce the sensual mood, so careful a choice of epithet to convey mere animal sensations, that we merely shudder at the shameless nakedness (37).

Going on to claim that the sensual nature of humans is "holy", Buchanan essentially argues that sex and art cannot overlap. This reinforces the problematic notion that sex is solely a means of reproduction and that any "impure" representation of the action is sinful, a concept which contributed to the oppression of Victorian women. Echoing Greg by referring to sexual desire as "animal sensations" that must be strictly concealed, Buchanan also expresses his belief that sexuality is detached from femininity and is therefore awakened by masculinity. To further illustrate Buchanan's sexism within his essay, one can point to his comments regarding Rossetti's depictions of passion between romantic partners: "Females who bite, scratch, scream,

bubble, munch, sweat, writhe, twist, wriggle, foam, and in a general way slaver over their lovers, must surely possess some extraordinary qualities to counteract their otherwise most offensive mode of conducting themselves” (44). Here, Buchanan expresses disgust towards Rossetti’s less placid descriptions of female affection, suggesting that there is a bestial nature to feminine love and sexuality. His discomfort signals that he prefers a gentle, unassuming female character, which speaks to his Victorian ideals of modesty.

Though Buchanan’s sexism is palpable within his essay, he points to a few glaring issues with Rossetti’s “Jenny” that are applicable to current critical readings of the poem. Buchanan avoids taking the simple route by condemning Rossetti for choosing to write about a sex worker; instead, he formats his criticism in a way that censures him due to his treatment of the subject. He writes,

What we object to in this poem is not the subject, which any writer may be fairly left to choose for himself; nor anything particularly vicious in the poetic treatment of it; nor any bad blood bursting through in special passages. But the whole tone, without being more than usually coarse, seems heartless. There is not a drop of piteousness in Mr. Rossetti (47).

Criticisms like this led to Rossetti later using his concept of the “inner standing-point” to defend his poetry and deflect criticism (Bentley 681). Buchanan ends his section about Jenny by stating, “‘Vengeance of Jenny's case,’ indeed! — when such a poet as this comes fawning over her, with tender compassion in one eye and aesthetic enjoyment in the other!” (47). Buchanan argues that while Rossetti’s perceived intention was to offer a sympathetic view of a sex worker, he seems to be objectifying and fetishizing Jenny through the narrator’s descriptions and behaviors towards her. His points about Rossetti’s aesthetic fascination brings to light the crucial issue with his

embodiment of women in his poetry and art, while also looping back to his sexist ideas about masculinity as he claims that reading “Jenny” is like “listening to an emasculated Mr. Browning” (46). Buchanan’s rejection of Rossetti’s literary abilities stems from their conflicting moral stances. While Rossetti aims to achieve open mindedness and self-improvement through “Jenny”, Buchanan asserts that his work is a disgrace to his sex and should only be studied as an example of what masculinity is not.

From the start of “Jenny”, Rossetti’s male narrator is given complete control of Jenny’s characterization, molding her identity to align with a tragic victim narrative that will incite guilt and drive his male savior complex. The first line reads, “Lazy laughing languid Jenny” (Rossetti, “Jenny” 1), a notable use of alliteration that emphasizes Jenny’s unconscious and oblivious state. The speaker is aware that Jenny is completely oblivious to his internal perception of her as she falls asleep, and therefore he begins with his degrading description. The word “lazy” implies that she is unskilled, untalented, and unwilling to do anything to alter her current situation and quality of life. Both “laughing” and “languid” suggest that she is mentally slow or incapacitated in some way and cannot think or feel rationally or complexly. The narrator then goes on to state, “Fair Jenny mine, the thoughtless queen” (7). This suggests not only that Jenny is the male’s possession, but that she is also completely unable to think for herself. Following “thoughtless” with the dignified term “queen” alludes that Jenny’s assumed lack of intelligence makes her more beautiful and physically appealing. A nobility queen is also a female figure that men are required to guard and defend, which is indicative of the speaker’s intention to portray himself as a protector. This point is further proven by the fact that there is repetition of the word “poor”, and Jenny is even referred to as a “Poor flower” (14), insinuating that she is frail and weak and an object of pity. In contrast, the term queen was used in past literary work, particularly during

the Shakespearean era, as a moniker for “prostitute”. While the use of this diction could be romanticizing Jenny’s perceived ignorance and enhancing the speaker’s ego, it could also imply that her vapidness is associated with her profession.

Before the narrator continues with his assumptions about Jenny, he feels compelled to justify his current situation and provide an explanation as to why he is in a prostitute’s room. This tangential background information serves to express the narrator’s desire to eliminate the possibility of being grouped in with other men who utilize Jenny’s services and is the initial indicator of his guilty conscience. He insults Jenny’s intelligence while simultaneously boasting his own, remarking, “This room of yours, my Jenny, looks / a change from mine so full of books” (22-23). The narrator establishes himself as an educated, well-read man who is above corresponding with a sex worker, and in fact, is completely unfamiliar with the setting. This contradicts a statement he makes in the next stanza, but it serves to distract the reader from his past actions by attempting to impress them with his current prosperity. The narrator goes on to explain, “It was a careless life I led / When rooms like this were scarce so strange / Not long ago” (37-39). While the speaker attempted to moralize himself in the previous stanza by implying that he does not associate with prostitutes, he confesses here that he frequently sought out their services. He admits to living carelessly during this time, yet he finds fault in Jenny for engaging in the same act as him as a paying profession. The narrator’s self-contradicting statements reveal that his train of thought is scattered and unorganized due to his guilty conscience.

As his words echo through the room unheard by anyone but himself, the speaker contemplates the possibility of voicing his feelings to Jenny. He describes his thoughts as an “empty cloud” (155), meaning he believes that nothing will result from this expression of

spontaneous emotion and his observations are meaningless. These thoughts have already precipitated, leaving him with only the possibility of repeating them to the woman who incited them, as he asks, “What if to her all this were said?” (157). He then proclaims,

Why, as a volume seldom read  
 Being opened halfway shuts again,  
 So might the pages of her brain  
 Be parted at such words, and thence  
 Close back upon the dusty sense. (158-162)

The narrator compares Jenny’s mind to a disregarded text, which implicitly states that the mind of the sex worker is not explored or known to many. Her body is represented by the book itself, which opens and closes along with access to her personality and emotions. Since Jenny’s profession is centered around a bodily performance, her genuine emotions cannot be perceived, leaving her almost completely unread. This further highlights the speaker’s internalized guilt, as he attempts to speak her personality and feelings into existence while being aware that he cannot truly know. The speaker portrays the closing of the metaphorical pages of Jenny’s mind as her ignorance, but when interpreting the lines as an expression of internalized guilt, it can be gathered that Jenny’s imagined reaction in this situation is more than rational. If this weren’t a hypothetical, Jenny would be rejecting a male’s assumptions and surface observations about her and reclaiming her identity as her own. In the essay “Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture”, Amanda Anderson writes, “It [‘Jenny’] also serves as a touchstone because it powerfully dramatizes the speaker’s inability to achieve any kind of mutuality or reciprocity with the (in this case, literally) fallen figure” (18). Though the narrator sets out to analyze and understand Jenny, his perception of her is completely tainted by his

emotions and biases as a male. Jenny is out of reach: though access to her body can be obtained for a price, her consciousness is locked – and one can argue that by trying to tap into this aspect of her being, the narrator is, in a sense, violating her, and doing so while she is asleep and unable to respond.

In the same stanza, the narrator goes on to further disparage Jenny under the guise of sympathy. The statement “Jenny’s desecrated mind” (164) is heavily symbolic of the concept of culpability within the narrator. While the phrase implies that Jenny’s life as a sex worker has destroyed her ability to form intelligent or original thoughts, it also implies that Jenny has deep-rooted trauma due to her treatment at the hands of men. As one of Jenny’s clients, the speaker is willfully partaking in this so-called desecration, and yet he does not outwardly present himself as being at fault. Though the narrator previously recounted his troubled past, he believes that he is capable of making keen insights regardless, which is indicative of the double standard he holds women to. He follows up with “Where all the contagious currents meet” (165), which portrays Jenny’s train of thoughts as dirty and infected. The line right after this references Lethe, the river of forgetfulness in Greek mythology, implying that Jenny wishes for her mind to be rid of her impure memories. The word “contagious” also hints at the possibility of contracting venereal diseases from participating in sex work, and the narrator is also failing to directly acknowledge his part in this.

In his efforts to portray himself as a moral superior, the speaker begins to think about both Jenny’s mortality and the fate of mankind. Making religious references and alluding to Judgement Day (217), the narrator’s spiritual anxieties can be perceived as he despairs for the future. Uttering “How Jenny’s clock ticks on the shelf!” (220), the narrator is not actually expressing fear for Jenny’s fate: instead, he is expressing fear for his own. He projects these

anxieties onto Jenny because of his belief that she serves to represent the sins of his past, further objectifying her and removing her from her own sense of self. At the same time, the clock's placement upon a shelf suggests stagnancy, which can be interpreted in a few different ways. This hints at the narrator's dissatisfaction with the mundanity of his current pursuits, both in education and occupation, yet another factor which led him into the room of Jenny. Expanding on the idea that the speaker sees Jenny as a blank slate which he can impose his own meaning and purpose onto, Jenny is viewed as an article of amusement and experience by the narrator. To take a separate approach to this line, the narrator could also be implying that Jenny's lifespan is in danger of reduction due to her perilous profession and her encounters with aggressive men. Both physical violence and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases put sex workers at risk during the nineteenth century, threats which existed largely due to the recklessness of men. The narrator recognizes this internally, voicing his guilt for his contribution to this dire issue by addressing concern for Jenny's mortality. Linking back to his religious allusion to Judgement Day, the speaker worries that he will be unable to achieve salvation due to his encounters with prostitutes and the transgressions of his youth. This is the real horror that plagues his mind; Jenny is simply the outlet for it.

Indicating the value that Victorian society placed on female innocence, the narrator begins to lament for Jenny's lack thereof. Conscious of the fact that Jenny is viewed as a broken woman in part due to his utilization of her services, the narrator expands upon the expression of his guilt that has been embedded within the entire poem thus far. First comparing her to a pressed flower, the speaker states,

Like a rose shut in a book

In which pure women may not look,

For its base pages claim control

To crush the flower within the soul. (253-256)

As flowers are symbolic of purity, these lines symbolize the destruction of Jenny's sexual piety and worthiness. The book itself and its explicit contents are a metaphor for the men that have "deflowered" Jenny and therefore have gained authority over her reputation within society. The narrator even isolates Jenny from the rest of her gender, claiming the untainted women must shield their eyes from her and disregard her existence. The defilement of Jenny is then referred to as "vile text" (259) on her soul. While it is asserted that Jenny is the one that must suffer due to her engagement in sex work, she is not the sole participant in these "sinful" acts that violate her Victorian virtue. Men, including the narrator, are themselves the vile text that stains Jenny, as their sexual engagement with her remains the sole determiner of her ruination. The phrase can be connected to another line in the poem in which the speaker refers to Jenny's "pier-glass scrawled with diamond rings" (322). Jenny's mirror, which has been engraved with the signatures of her clients (Roe 39), is an object which is represented here as not only reflecting her physical body, but her essence as well. The men that Jenny has engaged with left a permanent mark on her soul that, in the eyes of Victorians, cannot be polished, buffed out, or undone. While thinkers such as Acton might have insisted that prostitutes could be renewed through marriage, most Victorians rejected this notion, viewing fallen women as perpetually polluted. Beyond the damage to Jenny's purity, one can gather that Jenny may also be traumatized by the hostility she is met with by clients and strangers, yet another layer of the "vile text" the speaker mentions.

While continuing to reflect on his perception of Jenny's existence solely through his gaze and his projected anxieties, the narrator begins to enter a dissociative state. As he gains an increasing amount of awareness of his own faults, Jenny becomes out-of-focus and visually



indistinguishable: “Yet Jenny, looking long at you, / The woman almost fades from view” (276-277). As Jenny’s physicality slips away from the narrator’s attention, his shame and guilt unravel. It becomes increasingly difficult for him to deny his role in the deterioration of Jenny, and the fault of the female disappears as he realizes that his entire monologue has sprouted from his guilty conscience. He goes on to say, “A cipher of man’s changeless sum, / Of lust, past, present, and to come, / Is left” (278-280), directly referring to the ignorance of man. A cipher is a mode of communication that is kept secret and hidden, indicating that his guilt has long been concealed. It further implies that men continue to convey abhorrence for women who do not save themselves for marriage and/or engage in promiscuity and prostitution to shroud their own contrition. Acknowledging the fact that he has formulated his conception of Jenny as an outlet for his internal remorse, he communicates that there is nothing left to observe about Jenny herself in her unconscious state. Instead, there is plenty to ponder about the patriarchal debasement of women due to the heedless desires of men.

To fully grasp the narrator’s internalized guilt within “Jenny”, one must examine his assumptions about Jenny’s destiny and future. The speaker presents a disastrous outlook on the fate of prostitutes, alluding to the possibility of a pitiful suicide. Developing an image of an old, aging Jenny, the narrator states, “When, wealth and health slipped past, you stare / Along the streets alone, and there / Round the long park, across the bridge” (149-151). Without a compassionate individual in the world to turn to, the weakened Jenny is left to look off into the distance and contemplate throwing herself off a bridge to her death, falling victim to a treacherous fate similar to the prostitutes described by Acton and Greg. A disturbingly dark and dreary meditation on the result of societal exile and mistreatment is offered here, which is reminiscent of one of Rossetti’s visual artworks, a painting of a prostitute titled *Found* (Fig. 1).

In this piece, as the female subject's weakened body is encountered in cold isolation by a bystander, her recoiling posture and the positioning of her face towards the hardened brick wall indicates that she does not wish to be revived. Recovery would only mean that she would have the return to the same society that has rejected and disowned her, and she would have to continue to protect herself by barricading her heart, symbolized by the brick wall. While this image does address the abandonment of fallen women by a cruel, uncaring community, it problematically assumes that women affected by misfortune do not want help and view themselves as too far gone to receive aid in their time of need. Emily J. Orlando raises another concern with Rossetti's paintings of women in her article "'That I May Not Faint, or Die, or Swoon': Reviving Pre-Raphaelite Women", critiquing "the Pre-Raphaelite tendency to represent women as pale, passive, sickly, sexually objectified, broken, bereft, dying, dead—or a combination thereof" (615). In *Found*, the sex worker is portrayed as a defeated and forlorn figure, yet she still attracts the attention of a man who wishes to save her whilst it is already too late. This suggests that men will always fail to take accountability when it is crucial.

At the end of the poem, the narrator engages in peculiar behavior in an attempt to alleviate his guilt before ending his correspondence with Jenny. First, he places a cushion beneath her head (337), portraying this as his personal regard for her comfort. In actuality, the narrator does this to avoid waking her and prevent himself from being faced with conscious Jenny outside of a sexual act. Being faced with the waking woman he had just objectified and used as an outlet for his own internalized anxieties would be an inconvenience for him, as he would then be forced to confront the actuality of Jenny and set aside his tragic, fantastical version of her. Next, he spreads money in her hair before he leaves: "I lay among your golden hair, / Perhaps the subject of your dreams, / These golden coins" (340-342). While romanticizing

this financial transaction to distract himself from his looming guilt, the narrator also assumes that Jenny's dreams are superficial and materialistic. The speaker then imagines Jenny waking to find the coins in her hair and namedrops Danae from Greek mythology (377-379), essentially comparing himself to a god (Zeus). This further asserts that the narrator has formulated his view of Jenny to suit his particular needs, which is now to amplify his ego. In the final full stanza of the poem, the narrator confesses that he is "ashamed of [his] own shame" (384), indicating that he regrets revealing the "cipher of man" (278) and wishes to hide his guilt yet again. This statement reflects the stereotypically masculine behavior of concealing one's true emotions to appearing stern and unfeeling.

To fully understand Rossetti's aim during the revision of "Jenny", it is crucial to acknowledge the distinction between himself and the poem's speaker. Rossetti creates a male character that represents his vision of the ideal client for a sex worker. Attesting both his education along with a former addiction to visiting prostitutes in the past, the speaker represents a man who is well-respected but lacks drive and falls guilty to risky pleasures – sex and alcohol (37-39). In this way, Rossetti has intentionally formulated his speaker to be palatable for a male audience and easy for them to identify with. The speaker is an upstanding citizen to any outsider who judges him solely on the basis of his academic accomplishments, but behind closed doors – often the doors of a sex worker's dwelling – he reveals his weaknesses. Rossetti has softened this male speaker through his admission of his own personal failures, providing an explanation as to what led him into Jenny's room. By acknowledging male vulnerability – something which was done rather infrequently – Rossetti fostered male engagement in the themes he sought to highlight in "Jenny". Furthermore, Rossetti's speaker exhibits a gentleness that allows other men to view him as almost heroic, accentuating his point of view as a male savior. As Jenny rests

upon his knee, the speaker gives no indication that would lead one to believe that he had any desire to harm or violate her in her defenseless state. Instead, he shows disdain for the men who have likely mistreated Jenny in the past. While his disgust towards sexually violent men is palpable, he almost applauds himself for not engaging in similar acts. This, again, makes the speaker a perfect baseline character for men to connect with.

As both a poet and a painter, Rossetti was inspired by themes of prostitution not only in “Jenny”, but in his unfinished artwork, *Found* (Fig. 1). The work depicts a man grasping the wrists of a prostitute who lays limp against a brick wall, appearing to be deceased. Her stark white skin, closed eyes, and awkward posture indicate that she has passed away, and the male figure is pictured trying to hoist her up or jerk her awake. Speaking to what she regards as the consistency of Rossetti’s artwork, Henderson writes, “even distinct works [from Rossetti] tend to look the same. The most casual observer can usually recognize a late Rossetti painting: a beautiful woman with abundant hair and a sensuous mouth fills a shallow picture plane” (914). However, I would argue that upon viewing the facial expression of the female figure in *Found*, one would certainly be able to discern Rossetti’s intentions with this work from his use of models in his other paintings. The woman’s soft features appear almost hardened and pained, as her brow seems to be turned in or furrowed and a dark shadow is cast underneath her eye. Even in studies, the prostitute Rossetti portrays seems haggard and aged, wearied and weakened by the physical exertion of her livelihood. Behind the figures, a lamb is inside a wagon and covered in netted rope that is tied to the vehicle. The lamb’s face, though not exactly centered, appears to be looking in the direction of the viewer of the work, inviting them to contemplate on this added detail. A lamb is an animal that is both exchanged and consumed, and this mirrors the act of prostitution. The net around the lamb is symbolic of its entrapped state, and its desolate and

vacant expression is similar to that of the fallen woman in the painting. Her position relative to the setting and relative to the male figure represents her societal oppression, as she is concealed behind a wall and is turned away from the male figure, who is standing straight and towers above her slouched and submissive posture.

In regards to the incomplete background imagery in *Found*, Rossetti intended to paint a London cityscape, depicting a bridge lit by streetlamps far off behind the figures in the foreground (Hunt 2). The lack of natural elements aside from the lamb is quite compelling, as the only link to nature that the woman is pictured with is a captive, domesticated animal. This, along with the seemingly infinite expanse of buildings that Rossetti mapped out, indicates that the female figure is lost and detached from the reality nature intended for her. Donnelly addresses this in his article “Sonnet—Image—Intertext: Reading Rossetti’s The Girlhood of Mary Virgin and *Found*”, noting, “The city becomes a backdrop against which the variant narratives of Victorian sexuality are displayed, and the iconography of *Found* ensures that it is read in terms that identify the woman as fallen, linking her inevitably to prostitution, contamination, and disease” (483). Victorian ideals link sex with reproduction and always associate women with modesty. Rossetti’s portrayal of the fallen women violates what Victorians viewed as inherent and acceptable behavior for women, and therefore implies that the sex worker is a foreign being that man is unable to reach.

Originally intended to be a completed oil painting, *Found* is accompanied by many studies and sketches from Rossetti, along with a sonnet published in his 1881 collection *Ballads and Sonnets*. This haunting poem narrates the fallen woman’s tragic fate as she suffered from a lonely death and was later found by an unassuming man. Rossetti writes, “Dark breaks to dawn. But o’er the deadly blight / Of love deflowered and sorrow of none avail” (“Found” 5-6). The

looming pessimism of these lines convey that the prostitute has known nothing of genuine intimacy, care, or consideration, and has only been tossed aside and degraded throughout her life. There is no end to her internal torment, even in death, as she maintains a wretched expression in the painting. The last few lines of the sonnet read, “He only knows he holds her;—but what part / Can life now take? She cries in her locked heart,— / ‘Leave me—I do not know you—go away!’” (12-14). The statement “He only knows he holds her” speaks to both the man’s ignorance and his presumed role as a chivalrous protector of women, which is followed by a question that denies his ability to fulfill this task. The woman’s “locked heart” (13) is a metaphor for the internalization of her true emotions and affections as a result of her profession and her place in society due to both her profession and her existence as a female in a male-centered world. The final line signifies her lack of trust, likely due to being used, abused, and taken advantage of repeatedly during her years.

Through the analysis of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “Jenny” and *Found*, nineteenth-century attitudes towards femininity and masculinity can be observed. While men were expected to portray themselves as chivalrous male saviors while internalizing the guilt they may hold due to their role as the oppressor, women were expected to remain pure, mild-mannered, and intellectually ignorant. The “Jenny” narrator’s portrayal of Jenny is not only representative of the male perception of sex workers, it represents the patriarchal view of women as a whole during this time period. Any woman who failed to maintain innocence and chastity was deemed worthless and disposable in the Victorian era and was left to live a life of sorrow and dejection. The objectification of women as male property still pollutes modern Western culture, as the male gaze dictates how women are represented in media and how they should carry themselves in their everyday lives. Reading “Jenny” and viewing *Found* through a gender critical lens and

interpreting the internalized male guilt Rossetti exudes in his work allows for a well-versed understanding of gender relations in Victorian society and society today.



Fig 1. Found, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. 1854. *Delaware Art Museum.*

## Chapter 2: Choice and Condemnation in Augusta Webster's "A Castaway"

While the likes of Rossetti exploited images of fallen women for the purpose of aestheticism and self-inflation in both written and visual art, a courageous feminist figure displayed sincere empathy for her "ruined" sisters in a groundbreaking poetic piece. In Augusta Webster's dramatic monologue "A Castaway", a prostitute narrator articulates her grievances against functioning under a patriarchal capitalist system. Maintaining a slightly more privileged stance than most women of her profession as a relatively high-class sex worker, the speaker Eulalie refutes the class distinction between herself and poor prostitutes. While still acknowledging their differences, mainly in outward appearance and standards of living, Eulalie unifies with her fellow sex workers, even those who are homeless, diseased, or physically unappealing. The speaker, rather than placing herself on a pedestal above less fortunate prostitutes, claims to occupy essentially the same space in society as them, declaring, "our traffic's one" (Webster 82). At the same time, she partitions herself from conventional Victorian women, to the extent of dissociating from her former self before she was "ruined".

As she reflects further upon her life experiences both past and present, Eulalie's feelings of dejection evolve into anger and disgust towards the corrupt institutions that pardon male immorality while condemning women for lesser sins. Rather than focusing solely on the misfortune of a woman's fall, Webster positions her speaker to point out the social ills that lead a woman to selling sex. While Eulalie stresses that sex work is a mode of survival, she also asserts that it is one of the few options women are given and could be the best option in certain circumstances such as her own. Webster's "A Castaway" challenges stereotypical depictions of prostitutes through the critical voice of a complex sex worker narrator. Unlike other writers who fail to view prostitution as anything other than a devastating and destructive cycle, Webster



examines how choice and agency intertwines with female sex work and redirects judgment towards the lives of civilian women, who are also oppressed, and dubious men who hold positions of power.

More than simply a poem about a prostitute, Webster's "A Castaway" served as a bold feminist work with activism at its forefront. Eulalie's character morphed into a vehicle for social commentary and critique, perhaps even unveiling some of Webster's personal woes as a woman living in Victorian society. Described as a "highly respectable woman, if somewhat unconventional in her ambitions for herself and other middle-class women", Webster was both a wife and a mother, whom one could argue was fulfilling the role that was preconceived for her since birth (Sutphin 514). Webster utilized her positive reputation, however, to advocate for other women who sought a different path or ended up on one as a result of being – quite literally – "cast away" by their family and their community. While Dante Gabriel Rossetti could easily be labeled and categorized as a seducer or a "male chauvinist pig" by critics new and old, Webster was highly regarded for her virtuous qualities and her emotional and academic intelligence which shone through her work. Rather than scoffing in disgust at prostitutes who roamed the streets of England and took men back to their rooms, Webster used her "inner standing point" as a woman to level with fallen women and empathize with their unique situations. Part of Webster's aim was clearly to avoid exemplifying the description of the married maiden given by Eulalie: a dutiful and ignorant wife who remained quiet and oblivious to the outside world, not even able to grasp or comprehend the idea that there were women who lived differently than her. Webster's ability to view women with a similar lifestyle to her through a pivotal lens demonstrates her heightened awareness of the nuances of gender roles and feminism, making her the perfect candidate to construct this captivating literary piece.

To provide a short synopsis of “A Castaway”, the poem starts with Eulalie, the prostitute narrator, lamenting over her old diary filled with recollections of the simple, meaningless events that filled her days pre-ruination. Disconnected from this version of herself, Eulalie begins to reflect upon her current identity, through both her own eyes and how she imagines other women view her. While acknowledging that her beauty and femininity has been revoked by strangers due to her profession, she still relishes in her physical beauty as both a tool that sustains her survival and keeps her rooted in womanhood despite the ostracization from her sex. Eulalie makes it known that while she is a more accomplished and prestigious sex worker than many of the prostitutes that suffered in poverty, those who were not as financially fortunate as her and did possess the same degree of physical allure could be classified into the same category as her. Aware of how society perceived her as a lesser being because of her work, Eulalie, while remaining humble, turned the audience’s attention to everyday sinners belonging to primarily male establishments who negatively impacted their communities far more than any disenfranchised woman could ever even aspire to. Eulalie then assesses the sheltered housewives whom many would claim she was hurting, signaling their ignorance and breaking down their positions as victims of the patriarchy as well. She also expresses that while part of her desires “to go back / to the good days, the dear old stupid days” (Webster 222-223), there are more reasons for her to continue engaging in survival sex work than to attempt to reinstate herself back into polite society. Vocalizing her guilt for even existing as a woman whilst she believes there to be an excess of females, she claims that her redemption would only serve to place another woman at a disadvantage, plummeting her to the very place that Eulalie would have narrowly escaped. Distinguishing love from care and tenderness, the speaker mourns the absence of genuine affection in her life and laments the fall of her estranged relationship with her brother, longing

for a family connection once more. Identifying her “womanly pride” (Webster 612) as the cause of her fall, as she refused to accept payment from her dead child’s father, proclaiming that “Money’s the root of evil” (Webster 621), Eulalie longed to be forgotten as she viewed her memory as a stain on the hearts of those who were once close to her.

When examining the existing scholarly work around Webster’s “A Castaway”, it is easy to identify the economic standpoint that remains at the forefront of many of the essays. Susan Brown compares Webster to the repeal feminists of her time who “argued that the [Contagious Diseases] Acts dealt with the symptoms rather than the disease of prostitution, whereas socio-economic reform would eradicate what regulation did not even alleviate” (80). Noting that prostitution was largely the result of economic inequity, Brown frames prostitutes as a product subjected to supply and demand. This points to Webster’s justification of Eulalie’s prostitution as a public service to respectable women, who would run the risk of being outnumbered if Eulalie attempted to conform to a traditional feminine role. Christine Sutphin’s article “Human Tigresses, Fractious Angels, and Nursery Saints: Augusta Webster’s *A Castaway* and Victorian Discourses on Prostitution and Women’s Sexuality” discusses the blurring of female class lines in “A Castaway” and the narrative authority given to Webster’s speaker when articulating “a sense of agency and choice at the same time that she offers a devastating critique of the way in which laissez-faire economics commodifies women” (523). Sutphin concedes that Eulalie “feeds upon her own beauty”, making her “dependent on an oppressively gendered economic system” (523-524). Rigg evaluates Webster’s characterization of Eulalie as a means of shifting the reader’s focus to the social contexts that she serves to criticize. Taking a slightly different approach than Sutphin, rather than placing Eulalie on a level with her oppressors, Rigg argues that she can be viewed “not so much as the castaway but as the one casting away those who

persist in placing her economic reality within a moral framework inconsistent with that reality” (96). Rigg gauges the risk of Eulalie’s redemption over the cons of her continuing sex work and studies the ways in which her resentment empowers her.

While scholars have thoroughly examined the economic commentary scattered in the lines of Webster, most have not wholly assessed how participation in sex work has enlightened Eulalie’s understanding of the world. Eulalie has, in a sense, freed her mind from the blissful unawareness that imprisoned her during her short-lived existence as a self-described “good girl”, and a degree of pride is palpable within her. While her shame is encouraged by members of her community who have disowned her, this pride comes solely from within her, as she becomes completely removed from her benighted former self. Eulalie expresses a great amount of self-awareness, especially when explicating how choice is involved in her perpetuation of her position as a sex worker. While communicating that society has given her little choice as a woman, she also delineates that prostitution may even be the most favorable choice, as life in a traditional female role would be treacherous now that she has surpassed ignorance through experience. Exhibiting no shame when identifying with poor prostitutes, this attitude is counteracted by Eulalie’s disdain towards civilian women, stating, “What right have they to scorn us -- glass-case saints, / Dianas under lock and key -- what right / more than the well-fed helpless barn-door fowl / to scorn the larcenous wild-birds?” (Webster 134-137). Eulalie’s utilization of her beauty is not a matter of conforming to economic oppression as Sutphin insists, it is an empowering act of rebellion. Rather than concealing her beauty leaving it only to be seen by one man, Eulalie transforms her beauty into profitable means. Therefore, she allows herself to decide her own worth rather than granting others permission to dictate her worthiness based on beauty, innocence, and respectability, which all women are expected to equally maintain.

Attesting her own attractiveness, Eulalie explains how her beauty can be employed as a tangible asset that she can use to her personal and profitable advantage. She proclaims, “Why, 'tis my all, / let me make much of it: is it not this, / this beauty, my own curse at once and tool / to snare men's souls” (40-43). While beauty would be required of her even if she were not a prostitute, and would in fact become even more important, her work enables her to financially gain from what was once her burden or “curse”. As the average Victorian woman was expected to remain chaste while still taking part in tireless physical upkeep which would only be admired by her husband, sex work enabled Eulalie to witness many men being captivated and entrapped by her beauty. This, in turn, bolstered her self-esteem, which she was aware was a feeling that not all sex workers would likely get to experience. Acknowledging the existence of poorer, “ugly” prostitutes, Eulalie refuses to participate in their dejection. Instead, she identifies with them:

I own my kindredship with any drab  
 who sells herself as I, although she crouch  
 in fetid garrets and I have a home  
 all velvet and marqueterie and pastilles,  
 although she hide her skeleton in rags  
 and I set fashions and wear cobweb lace:  
 the difference lies but in my choicer ware,  
 that I sell beauty and she ugliness;  
 our traffic's one (Webster 74-82).

While Eulalie is more likely to assign herself a greater worth and be considered an expensive luxury in the eyes of men, her place in Victorian society as a lesser breed of female remains. What one could perceive as success in her profession is solely the result of favorable genetics and good physical upkeep, which many prostitutes are unable to relish. Rather than considering herself superior to lower-class prostitutes, the speaker stands in unity with them, and instead turns to mock the “well-fed helpless barn-door fowl” (136) who, given knowledge of their profession, would crucify and ridicule them. Here, Eulalie demonstrates how she has departed from social conditioning, which would have taught her to have more respect for women belonging to the traditional roles of wife and mother than for her fellow sex workers.

As Eulalie addresses a positive aspect of sex work that had previously been overlooked, she takes on another even more controversial stance by implying that the conventional Victorian woman is perhaps more deserving of pity than others like herself. Realizing that the household woman has succeeded in adhering to the only respectable option that society has laid out for her, Eulalie argues that traditional wives and mothers have stripped themselves of their own freedom. While she explicates her feelings of loss and dejection, Eulalie recalls her estranged brother and the depressing severity of his wife’s conformity, reporting,

He has done well;  
 married a sort of heiress, I have heard,  
 a dapper little madam, dimple cheeked  
 and dimple brained, who makes him a good wife --  
 No doubt she'd never own but just to him,

and in a whisper, she can even suspect

that we exist, we other women things (638-644).

Though her brother's wife possesses something of value to Eulalie, closeness to her family member, it is clear that Eulalie does not envy her position. While Eulalie provided readers with her brother's name, his wife is not identified beyond the labels of "wife" and "heiress", labels which strip her of her individuality while communicating her worthiness within the society that oppresses her. Eulalie argues that the woman's reduction to these titles has resulted in the relinquishment of her intelligence and independence, as the ideal Victorian female was expected to remain dumb and clueless, possessing knowledge of nothing other than being pretty and subservient for her husband while also managing his household. The prostitute criticizes this mindless way of life that subjected women to unending longing and emptiness, stating, "No wishes and no cares, almost no hopes, / only the young girl's hazed and golden dreams / that veil the Future from her" (21-23). While the majority of Victorians would view a traditional household woman's life as covetous compared to Eulalie's situation, Eulalie asserts that such women are tortured by the thought of their own hopes and dreams, as their social limitation prevents them from ever bringing these aspirations to fruition. While a prostitute at the very least is able to experience new people and environments, a traditional Victorian wife is constrained to the home, where she is left to yearn for engagement with the outside world.

Shifting from the pride and empowerment that she exhibited previously, Eulalie begins to expound the shame and guilt that she is made to feel due to her unconventional utilization of her womanhood. The one aspect of Eulalie's identity that allows her to feel connected to her gender – her beauty – is the very trait that is causing others to fail to view her as a respectable woman. Eulalie is made to feel disgusted due to the way she employs her beauty to "swindle" men into

providing her with physical tokens of her worth in the form of monetary compensation.

Divulging her embarrassment, Eulalie confesses,

Oh God, do I not know it? I the thing  
of shame and rottenness, the animal  
that feed men's lusts and prey on them, I, I,  
who should not dare to take the name of wife  
on my polluted lips (410-414).

Though Eulalie attempts to admire and praise herself for her unorthodox approach to participating in femininity, she is constantly forced to remember the remorse she is supposed to feel. Men are positioned as victims of trickery and exploitation when they are the ones who actively seek out sex workers to fulfill their physical desires and provide them with contentment. Prostitutes are demonized for providing men with a service that they are in constant demand of, while their male clients are absolved of any accountability as society turns a blind eye to the cause of sex work. Just as W.R. Greg argued against the public acknowledgement of male transgression, Eulalie is made to carry the weight of responsibility for sin and societal contamination, as she is the only one being criminalized. At the same time as she digresses into condemnation of her own actions, Eulalie maintains that the self-hatred she is experiencing would not cease if she resided in a typical feminine role. Instead, it would only be amplified: “Quiet is hell, I say -- as if a woman / could bear to sit alone, quiet all day, / and loathe herself, and sicken on her thoughts” (249-251). The monotonous lack of activity that would plague Eulalie if she were a traditional wife would only serve to torment her to an even greater degree.



Here, Eulalie emphasizes the fact that women are unique individuals with distinct personalities and ambitions, and therefore they should not be restricted to one path.

Considering the idea of redemption that was proposed by Acton, Eulalie begins to divulge her experiences as a sex worker and the emotional qualities of her work that she believes would prevent her from functioning within a household role. Engaging in prostitution has unveiled the façade of romance for Eulalie, who articulates a comparison between lust-driven love and genuine care and compassion:

loved -- no not that word,  
 that loved which between men and women means  
 all selfishness, all putrid talk, all lust,  
 all vanity, all idiocy -- not loved  
 but cared for (421-425).

As a result of her position, Eulalie has been given many opportunities to peer into the inner workings of the male mind and gain a unique understanding of what he truly values. Often, married men disregard their families and seek out a sex worker for temporary pleasure and satisfaction. They may even confess feelings for Eulalie, who provides them with comfort in the form of paid emotional labor. Reflecting on this fundamental insight, Eulalie uses her acquired knowledge of male priorities to draw conclusions about what romantic love looks like within the home. The wisdom that Eulalie gained from her work demystified love for her, and instead she longs to be “cared for”. But who, if not a husband, could care for a woman?

simple children come

and ask their mother is this right or wrong,  
because they know she's perfect, cannot err;  
their father told them so, and he knows all,  
being so wise and good and wonderful,  
even enough to scold even her at times  
and tell her everything she does not know.  
Ah the sweet nursery logic! (428-435).

Eulalie establishes that only a child could provide the household woman with authentic affection. A husband's love was condescending, manipulative, and egocentric, and she highlighted the irony of the children's' ignorance in all of this by discrediting their perception of their mother and father's relationship as "nursery logic". In Eulalie's eyes, this arrangement was far from ideal or desirable, especially due to her knowledge of the brokenness of this system acquired through her first-hand experiences with men. The household is described here as a closed system, in which the husband, whose goodness is predetermined by his sex, is the sole definer of his wife's goodness. In her profession, Eulalie has likely encountered countless promiscuous husbands willing to betray their spouses for a moment of spontaneous intimacy, leading her to find a fault in this structure. If the man of the house is fallible and can no longer be considered "good", the entire system of Victorian marriage is undermined.

Aiming to further illustrate the critical thinking process of sex workers, the speaker justifies her preference of continuing prostitution and provides an explanation as to why this option is more beneficial to her than the opportunity of redemption. She describes, "You go back

to the old home, / and 'tis not your home, has no place for you, / and, if it had, you could not fit you in it” (226-228). Due to her involvement with countless men in her line of work, Eulalie’s perspective on home life has completely shifted from what it once was. Before her fall, Eulalie was blind to the ugly side of marriage, as women were always taught that it was the only path they should desire. Now, a traditional feminine role seems completely unrealistic for her, as her awareness would disable a male from positioning himself above her. Due to her lack of ignorance regarding the reality of relationships between men and women, she would not fit into the mold of a subservient Victorian wife. Eulalie also discloses the significance of survival sex work, explaining,

Well, I came back,  
  
Back to my slough. Who says I had my choice?  
  
Could I stay there to die of some mad death?  
  
and if I rambled out into the world,  
  
sinless but penniless, what else were that  
  
but slower death, slow pining shivering death  
  
by misery and hunger? Choice! (263-269).

Because of Victorian society’s rejection of the atypical female, Eulalie would be forced to starve and suffer while she desperately attempts to prove her worth to any man who would take her, not knowing if this man would even provide her with safety and stability. Therefore, prostitution poses a lesser risk to Eulalie than redemption, crumbling Acton’s theory and vindicating fallen women who choose prostitution.

Rather than focusing strictly on the sins of the prostitute and her clients, Webster provides her speaker with a voice that condemns societal ills that are normalized or go unnoticed due to the involvement of male authoritative figures. Eulalie expresses her disdain for men who preach about the morality of women, stating,

What, does the windy dullard think one needs

his wisdom dove-tailed on to Solomon's,

his threats out-threatening God's, to teach the news

that those who need not sin have safer souls? (173-176).

Here, Eulalie provides a religious justification for her anger towards judgmental male community members, remarking that their “threats out-threaten God’s”. Eulalie criticizes the male ego by claiming that their self-importance places them above divinity in their own minds, and this god complex is paraded as principled. Additionally, she declares sin as a “need”, indicating that sex work is often a means of survival for women who have been ostracized by society due to reasons out of their control, such as abandonment by a seducer or generational poverty. She shifted the audience’s focus from prostitutes to the corruption that existed within many male-predominant careers and organizations that were crucial to civilization, claiming, “I know of worse that are called honourable. / Our lawyers, who, with noble eloquence / and virtuous outbursts, lie to hang a man, / or lie to save him, which way goes the fee” (86-89). Calling out men in power, Eulalie points to the fact that prostitutes are not the only members of their community who sin for money. To an even worse degree, men who held positions within the government or justice system participated in immorality by taking bribes and concealing criminality for their own gain. Here, Eulalie also displays a redeemable characteristic – concern

for the welfare of the general population – that most Victorians would assume she does not possess. By showcasing her own morality and emotional intellect, Eulalie rejects the stereotype that prostitutes do nothing to contribute to their community aside from harming families through the spread of sin and disease.

Why, in an economy based around exploitation and trickery, should prostitutes be deemed the lowest scum despite the fact that men seek them out? Eulalie argues that men are applauded for their sins and can turn them into a career while women are convicted for doing the same:

all of them, the virtuous worthy men  
 who feed on the world's follies, vices, wants,  
 and do their businesses of lies and shams  
 honestly, reputably, while the world  
 claps hands and cries "good luck" (98-102).

Declaring her disgust with the hypocrisy of Victorian culture, Eulalie valiantly attests to the dishonesty and depravity that is present within major male-dictated institutions. She argues that male vice is more than just condoned, it is actually viewed as virtuous and met with praise and encouragement by copious supporters. Eulalie empowers herself by attempting to reap the same benefits as men under a culture that bars her from equal opportunity.

By exploring the lines of Augusta Webster's "A Castaway", one can easily perceive how the feminist writer arms her speaker with mindful epiphanies and a legion of defenses. Rossetti's voiceless and frail prostitute is no longer – a female perspective shines a light on the real issues

that plague the sex worker. The misinterpretation of the fallen woman's mindset and intentions and a long list of social grievances disturb her peace to a much greater degree than her paid sexual arrangements with men. Rather than being portrayed as a victim of her occupation, Eulalie is a victim of a culture and her community. Victorian culture thrived on female oppression beyond the snubbing of the fallen woman. Eulalie maintained that women were persecuted even in romance and must rely on their children as their only source of genuine love and care. By situating Eulalie to defend her profession while criticizing so-called "respectable" individuals, Webster made great strides to incite social progress that would eventually lead to the pro-sex worker movement of modern-day feminism. Today, efforts are being made to decriminalize and protect sex workers, and arguments in favor of these developments echo the work of early feminist Augusta Webster, who was far ahead of her time.

## Conclusion

In nineteenth-century literature and art, the sex worker can be utilized as either an aesthetically tragic object of the male gaze or an impactful feminist tool. How the fallen woman is depicted depends on the gender of the writer or artist and their perspective on gender roles. Men, even if well-intentioned, were conditioned to view themselves as superior to women, and therefore they were often sexist in their representations of female figures, especially prostitutes. Female writers who were brave enough to oppose innocence despite intense social pressure and tackle the topic of sex work must have occupied an uninhibited and forward-thinking mind, making them more likely to value accuracy when portraying a woman in an unconventional role. By comparing the work of Rossetti and Webster, these dramatic differences in depiction can be perceived.

In the eyes of Rossetti, a prostitute must be a beautiful yet wretched symbol of fragility to be gawked at. She is to remain silent, if not only to utter her refusal to concern others with the inner depths of her mind, like the ill prostitute in the “Found” poem. The state of a woman, according to Rossetti, should only be assumed by men who look at her face and body in order to craft a narrative. When discussing Rossetti’s portrayal of women in his paintings, Elaine Shefer writes, “Rossetti presented an obvious justification between femininity (she who is beloved) and masculinity (he who loves)” (100). Rossetti’s female is uninvolved in her own feelings and her own life – things happen to her rather than her having choice and control over the course of her existence. Her position in love and romance is stagnant, echoing Greg’s description of male versus female sexual desire, where a woman’s sexuality is nonexistent until she is corrupted by a man’s natural urges. She cannot procure affections towards a man – instead, her emotions are a

projection of how men perceive her. Suicidality is inevitable for a Rossetti prostitute, as she succumbs to the despair of her circumstance that is dramatized to serve as an artistic element.

In Webster's writing, the female sex worker is vocal and active, exemplifying an ability to mindfully reflect on her situation and sentiments. Expressing disapproval of her past cluelessness, the prostitute speaker Eulalie demonstrates signs of self-improvement, despite her ongoing struggle battling feelings of isolation and dejection. Rather than succumbing to total self-hatred because of her position as an outsider, she exhibits a sense of pride as a result of her success within her profession. This pride, though, does not lead her to dissociate herself from penniless prostitutes. Instead, she declares her sisterhood in relation to all sex workers: wealthy or poor, beautiful or ugly. Her prosperity allows her to uplift other women rather than disgrace them – in fact, the only women she actively shames are the women who shame her for being involved in sex work. These women, she claims, have imprisoned themselves within the false institution of marriage, where dishonest husbands determine the worthiness of their wives based on their purity and obedience. While the Victorian civilian woman longs for wisdom and adventure that can only be sought beyond the shackles of her traditional feminine role, Webster's speaker has the freedom to roam and experience life through her own lens, rather than her husband's. Rossetti's prostitute is damned and pitiful, whereas Webster's prostitute is enlightened and independent.

By examining the contrasting representations within the work of these two nineteenth-century visionaries, a contemporary audience can recognize that the hardships female sex workers faced were not solely the result of their "fall". Rather, their struggles were rooted in gender inequity and the chastising of women who went against traditional Victorian ideals. Women who were not "ruined" by a seducer and could marry were not guaranteed success or



happiness, they were only rewarded with acceptance from their community, a community they could not truly involve themselves with because of their obligation to their husband's household. The societal misunderstanding of fallen women led to the majority of their discomfort, and the same statement can be applied to modern-day sex workers. These women lacked genuine guidance and protection due to their inability to adhere to the restrictive rules that all women were expected to conform to. They were oppressed not due to the role they occupied, but due to the role they did not occupy. One can only wonder if the sex workers who strolled the streets of London would have been radical changemakers, if only they were given a chance for their voices to be heard.

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