D. G. Rossetti and the Art of Representation

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Abstract: **Dante Gabriel Rossetti was one of the important painters and poets of the Victorian Era. He, along with other prominent art critics, painters, poets co-founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848. The main goal of this Brotherhood was to adopt the natural representation in both poetry and painting over, what they defined as "mechanistic approach". This drew both, approbation and appreciation from all corners of Victorian England. This 7-member Brotherhood comprised of famous names like William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, William Michael Rossetti, James Collinson, Frederic George Stephens, and Thomas Woolner, in addition to Dante Gabriel Rossetti. The premise of my paper is to study the similarity of D.G. Rossetti's representations combining paintings and poetry with the modern representative device – meme. Memes are pictures from popular-culture used in reference to individualistic situations to create a humorous response. Rossetti used popular references from Bible or Classical Stories to illustrate his poetry. It is interesting to study how he combines various references into both paintings and poetry to create a synesthetic synchronization.**

Keywords: **Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Hypertextuality, Intertextuality, Meme, Synesthesia.**

1. Introduction

Memes, in contemporary world, have become synonymous with caricatures of the yester-years. It draws its inspiration from well-known moments from popular series, movies, or even photographs. Just like cartoon strips, the initial goal of memes was to supply quick humour relating to some popular human sentiment however, it has evolved from being just a medium of entertainment to be an instrument in voicing dissent in countries where freedom of expression is limited, tracing its tracks like the more influential modes of visual representation like the comic strips, documentaries, etc.

This usage of popular images from visual media is not something modern. Memes use a recognised figure, public or imagined, with an adjoining dialogue modified to suit the message of the moderator. Dante Gabriel Rossetti did something similar, he painted scenes from the Bible using real models, quite against the then accepted practice. Further, he showed Biblical characters involved in tasks like embroidering, grape-picking, etc. that were considered menial. Thus, he initiated the practice of eliminating the lofty from paintings making them more relatable. He, also, painted figures from classics using real-life models and composed poems to address the symbolism and highlight the subtleties. Thus, combining in

his paintings the qualities that William Morris in a lecture delivered in 1892, on "The Woodcuts of Gothic Books", ascertained all art showcase, namely:

"All organic art, all art that is genuinely growing, opposed to rhetorical, retrospective, or academicals art, art which has no real growth in it has two qualities in common: the epical and the ornamental; its two functions are the telling of a story and the adornment of a space or tangible object." Dante Gabriel Rossetti is an artist who combines both the two functions of telling and illustrating, with his painting-poetry combination. Unlike the perceptive inequality that deters the representation of an illustrator who has the task of presenting into pictures the words of someone else, Rossetti handles both the tasks on his own, and as a result his paintings seamlessly combine with his poetry. He was deeply impressed by the poetry of Robert Browning and corresponded and visited him quite frequently. So unsurprisingly, his own poetry invites dialogue on presentation and representation, like R. Stein attests: "His [Rossetti's] poetry dramatizes the interrelation between alternative views of experience, between figurative and liberalistic treatments of a given subject."

The combination of two or more different arts has been the subject of deliberation, especially if it includes literature. In his 'Image-Music-Text', addressing the combination of a picture with text, Roland Barthes states that, "the text constitutes a parasitic message designed to connote the image, to quicken it with one or more second-order signifieds." To further simplify the study of combinatory arts, terminologies were developed and defined. In a similar vein, "Hypertextuality" was first defined as a literary term by Gerard Genette, the French theorist, in 1982. Genette explains that: "Hypertextuality refers to any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the hypertext) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it hypotext), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary." In 1994, Michael Riffaterre elaborated upon the idea of hypertextuality in his paper "Intertextuality vs. Hypertextuality". According to him, "Hypertextuality" has the following features:

1. Hypertextuality is derived from the text in a concerted effort to approximate the sum total of ideas, of the descriptive and narrative sign-systems, of the thematic material the text has appropriated to its own purposes, and, finally, of the text's social, cultural, and historical backgrounds.

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2. Hypertextuality is a metalinguistic tool for the analysis and interpretation of an existing text. This analysis may go beyond the text, producing variations on it.

3. Hypertextuality contextualizes the text, analysing literature in the light of what is not literature but what may lead to the creation of it.

4. Hypertextuality is open-ended and ever-developing; but, while it may be an exercise in creativity, it cannot distinguish between the creation of utterances that resemble literary ones and the generation of utterances that do not.

Unlike Genette's definition that restricted the study of literature against other texts, Riffaterre's Theory of Hypertextuality opens up the scope of studying texts against "what is not literature but what may lead to the creation of it." Riffaterre, thus, acknowledges that the text can be connected to other possible forms of representations. Just like Rossetti's paintings can be viewed as the 'hypertext' to the accompanying poetry since it provides an alternative description by both, challenging and aiding the viewer's imagination. In his "Blessed Damozel", one such instance when the poet merges, much to delight of poetic achievement, the female and the spirit of nature is:

"Her eyes were deeper than the depth
Of waters still'd at even;
She had three lilies in her hand,
And the stars in her hair were seven."

Simultaneously, Rossetti painted "The Blessed Damozel" reflecting the essence of the poem and combining the two artistic forms of poetry and painting. Eventually Rossetti developed the idea of representing his poetry with an accompanying poem. Initially, a few lines from the poem were carved on the frame of the paintings though later he composed poems on his earlier paintings as well. This idea of combining paintings and poetry did not receive the expected appreciation and Rossetti, being highly sensitive about feedbacks and criticisms, stopped eventually. In the later years, artists, influenced by the Swiss illustrator xyz, developed the newer forms like comics, caricatures, manga, and graphic novels.

"The Blessed Damozel"
Dante Gabriel Rossetti
(1875-1878) Oil on Paper

Rossetti's penchant for adding illustrations to poetry influenced major Victorian poets like Tennyson, Blake, and his own sister, Christina Rossetti to opt for illustrations to their poetry. This, in turn, gave rise to a new class of artists, namely, the illustrators. Of these Walter Crane, Henry Malcolm Kerr and Aubrey Beardsley were all indebted to Rossetti's works. In one way or another. Rossetti had major impact on William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones; he also influenced John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt, his co-founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. But much more importantly, Rosetti is credited with influencing European Symbolists and initiating the Aesthetic Movement. I believe that his opinion and usage of realistic paintings convinced artists and writers to shift their focus from fantastical to realism. His objective of representing the fantastical, too, as realistic can be seen in his paintings like The Girlhood of Mary Virgin. The Bible doesn't account for the life of Mary but Rossetti's portrayal of her embroidering a lily under her mother's tutelage was criticised by viewers. it was, however, a shift from the hitherto portrayed images of Christ and the Biblical characters as being other worldly. Rossetti brought in a relatability to the characters of Bible by portraying them as humanly over angelic. Rossetti showcases how "The visual speaker is a medium between the viewer and the world that is hidden from the viewer and/or it is present in a different way." (Shairi, 1393). As an artist, Rossetti's newer techniques and perceptions of representation introduced, within the Victorian arts, a tendency to favour actuality over fabricated and fantastical. Even though Rossetti's prime characters were fictional, his tendency to portray them as real as possible was the first step towards the gradual introduction of sketches, illustrations, and also, caricatures in the Victorian arts.

Another important aspect of Rossetti's contribution to the Victorian Era was his combining visual with verbal. It is crucial to remember that the Victorian period was the Era when the first comic strip, also known as the graphic novel, was published. In 1837, Switzerland's Rudolphe Topffer, first published The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck, and all over Europe and it was widely popular. Thus, it is evident that the idea of combining visual with verbal was avant-garde. I'm interested in studying how Rossetti contributed, if not initiated, the modern vogue of graphic novels, comics, and even, memes. Researches in Victorian Studies have focussed on various aspects of representations since print media had acquired the technological advancement of accurately publishing hand-made doodles, pen and ink sketches, cartoon strips, etc. However, researchers have limited their study to analyse the relationship between illustrator-writer, illustration-words, and reader-illustrator-writer. Kooistra states that:

"For the reader/viewer seeking correspondences between image and text, all illustration may be a parodic travesty of the text's language, for the representations never match the text seamlessly."

Thus, Rossetti's works, though, have acquiesced acceptance it still lacks the appropriate research and enthusiasm in the academic circle. The role of his works in diversifying the forms of representations by utilising interdisciplinary forms and combining the various forms of prevalent artistic modes is worth studying in a much broader aspect.

2. Conclusion

This paper presented an overview of D. G. Rossetti and the art of representation.

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