

MA Thesis Proposal Form

**Department of English & Comparative Literature
San Jose State University**

MA Thesis Proposal

Name:

Semester:

**Female Subjectivity and the Problem of Time in the Poetry of
Christina Rossetti**

In her well-
she is idealized and represented by a male artist. The relationship between the artist and his subject
is one of almost vampiric feeds upon her face by day (l.9), she is

inharmonious she may feel (l. 12). In the

poem takes the form of a Petrarchan sonnet, which by convention demands both the absence and idealization of the female, suggests that the masculine artistic tradition extends to poetic tradition in _____ mind, and she is commenting reflexively on the difficulty of her own poetic practice.

_____ central concerns in _____ the _____ are precisely those that I wish to investigate in my project researching her poetry: female subjectivity, time, and poetics in a world authored by men. I will explore the thematic recurrence of time in her poetry, and I will examine how it is used to construct the female subject. I will argue that Rossetti depicts gendered temporalities: a transcendent time aligned with nature and the feminine; and a material time aligned with waste and the masculine. I will show how the invasion of the male temporal order threatens female _____-hood is only possible outside of this male temporality. I will also demonstrate how Rossetti enacts these temporal

In exploring time as a theme in _____ poetry, I will situate her concept of time in the temporally-obsessed culture of the mid- to late 19th century. Charles _____ *Principles of Geology*, _____ theory of evolution, German biblical criticism, and discoveries in archaeology and anthropology throughout the period overturned its understanding of _____ origins and dwarfed his importance in _____ immensity of past _____ (Lye

attitudes as a living, changing whole, and the subjective experience of the individual. Buckley explores how the concepts of public and private time were debated and

Rossetti, and Swinburne.

does not consider the influence of gender in shaping the perception of time. He would hardly be

in submitting to the demands of life as a Christian woman, Antony Harrison celebrates her formal experimentation, semiotic play, and prosodic sophistication, reframing her as a virtuosic craftswoman (40-41). Harrison argues that Rossetti employs a of a deliberate eschewing of syntactic details and references in o

I. Time and the Body:

Poems

In this section, I will examine the way Rossetti represents the _____ as the consequence of being trapped within the masculine temporal order. In a discussion of Tess

Patricia Murphy describes how Tess is controlled within the patriarchal history as a temporally defined only through the materiality of the female body. Similarly, in

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courtship presents a situation that, as Rossetti observes, values women only for their physical appearance: in the masculine temporal order, youth and beauty become commodified. Accordingly, Rossetti uses the language of consumption and waste in relating what happens to her female subjects, a language that shifts the moral blame to the consumer.

a
poem which allegorizes the fallen woman and (progressively) imagines her salvation. In this fairy-tale setting, the invasion of linear, masculine time is manifest bodily in accelerated aging and physical listlessness after tasting the goblin fruit. Lizzie is able to save her sister by patiently enduring the assault of the goblin men without yielding to their temptation (i.e., she symbolically remains in her own time). Through her temporal order, and her aging as a result of the goblin assault is reversed. However, the poem does not end _____ salvation by her sister. I will further explore how Rossetti enacts the idea of

II. Out of time: Corpses

In this section, I would like to explore a strategy of staging that Rossetti uses to circumvent time and its gendered and ideological implications: death. While critics in the earlier part of the 20th century referred to the frequent presence of death and dead speakers in

enabled recent scholars to be able to read them as ironic counterdiscourse. In these poems,

revenge on oppression, an opportunity, paradoxically, for the dead woman to exercise

and and examine the ideological destabilization of
or nearly so by material time.

III. *Monna Innominata*

Scholars studying the efflorescence of the sonnet sequence in the late 19th century have cited the inherent conflict between the parts and the whole i.e., the individual sonnet and the entire sequence and its long literary tradition in its appeal to writers looking to explore historically self-conscious selfhood within the Victorian social order.

e and narrative momentum provides a natural literary vehicle for the Victorian fascination with time. In this chapter, I will consider the relationship between temporality, female subjectivity, and

Monna

Innominata

tradition. I will read *Monna Innominata* within the context of the sonnet sequence tradition, stretching from Dante and Petrarch to more contemporary examples, such as her

sonnet sequence, *The House of Life*, and Elizabeth Barrett

Sonnets of the

Portuguese

and constructs a distinctly

Annotated Bibliography

Armstrong, Isobel. *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*. Routledge, 1993.

In her formidable survey of Victorian poetry, Armstrong argues that the Victorians grappled with problems of the subject, representation, and language principally in the form deconstructed, feelings and beliefs. Armstrong demonstrates the subversive political currents underlying the work of female poets such as Christina Rossetti, for whom language was both a means of expression and repression.

Billone, Amy Christine. *Little Songs: Women, Silence, and the Nineteenth-Century Sonnet*. The Ohio State U, 2007.

from the 19th

demonstrates in a close-reading of *Monna Innominata* that, with masculine theories of language and the self (i.e., the sublime) inaccessible to her, Rossetti instead drew upon the

Buckley, Jerome Hamilton. *The Triumph of Time: A Study of the Victorian Concepts of Time, History, Progress, and Decadence*. Harvard UP, 1966.

Buckley places the

sense of time

Market as an allegory of sexual temptation and poetic ambition and the subsequent renunciation of both.

Gilmour, Robin. *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1830-1890*. Longman, 1993.

Gilmour provides an intellectual and cultural context for Victorian literature, focusing on science, religion, politics, and art. His book begins with a discussion of the contemporary preoccupation with time, which, as Gilmour shows, presides and comes to define the period.

Harrison, Antony H. *Christina Rossetti in Context*. The University of North Carolina P, 1988.

Harrison provides a broad overview of Christina work. He examines the tension

Morgan, Monique R. *Narrative Means, Lyric Ends: Temporality in the Nineteenth-Century British*

Long Poem. The Ohio State UP, 2009.

