**Part I: Preliminary Information**

**Title:** Analyzing the Representation and Influence of Nineteenth-Century Cultural Attitudes Towards Female Sexuality in Christina Rossetti’s Poetry

**Abstract:**

This project will study the cultural attitudes surrounding female sexuality during the Victorian Era in Britain (1837-1901) and analyze how these attitudes affected the creation and development of early feminist movements during the turn of the century. This project will use representations of female sexuality in Christina Rossetti’s (1830-1894) poetry as a lens through which to view such cultural complexity. Though there are many avenues of literary analysis, studying literature in its cultural and biographical context reveals external forces at work in shaping literary production and, in turn, the influences of literature on culture. This project studies Rossetti’s poetry within her own biographical and social context and explores early feminist movements and cultural attitudes towards women in the Victorian Era. It will analyze her ties to other Victorian poets and artists, such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood to illuminate her role in presenting Victorian femininity and also to assess the unique facets of her own artistic version of the female life. Recognizing Rossetti’s personal artistic portrayals will provide insight into the lives of British women in the Victorian Era. This project will apply that insight to understanding the development of early British feminist movements and the larger impact of cultural dialogue on the sexual agency of British women during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

**Personal Statement:**

I come from four generations of first-born daughters. I have been raised with the generational knowledge of almost 150 years of women who have had to pioneer their lives and create their own roles in society as women. They have passed their knowledge down to me, and I have combined their insight with my own personal experiences as the only daughter in my family. These generations of women taught me to be strong and independent, but nevertheless, my brothers often sought to muffle my voice. They frequently made fun of me for my strong opinions or my expressions of my strength. I never could understand why they tended to minimize my voice or my personal experiences as a girl and then as a woman. Had they not been raised by the same mother? Were they not also the product of four generations of first-born daughters? These questions caused me to wonder if their tendency to diminish me was more because of a cultural influence rather than a flaw within my family.

Those women who raised me instilled in me a strong sense of curiosity and a need to question everything I know. I learned my love of inquiry and research from them, and as a child I channeled that love through reading novels and writing my own poetry. I noticed that in many of the novels I read, their plots featured limiting and oppressive expectations that I was experiencing in my own life and family. I bounced back and forth between British and American literature, devouring authors like Mary Shelley (1797-1851) and Edith Wharton (1862-1937) and being acutely aware of how the female characters were portrayed. What were they wearing? What were they saying? What metaphors were being used to describe them? I found common links between their main female characters in their descriptions and dialogue, discovering complexities within their identities and expression of sexuality. While they were all powerful driving forces in the novels and often challenged traditional roles for women, the way in which they were described tended to utilize certain colors or specific metaphors that insinuated submission and sexual repression.

Many of the themes I began to notice in the literature I was reading focused on the woman and her sexuality. Imagery, metaphor, and other tropes alluded to the woman’s sexual agency and her sexual presence in the world, revealing aspects of the culture in which they were written and also connecting to the experiences in my own life. The descriptions of female characters would cause me to look at my life and notice how I, too, was being reduced to what I chose to wear and how my attractiveness was almost entirely defined by how desired I was by men. My family taught me to be proud of who I was, but my society taught me to diminish who I was. I had to find a way to rise above the din of a patriarchal society and to quell the loud voices telling me to be less of a woman and more of a lady, so I turned back to those novels to find strength in their female characters. I did find this strength, but I also found paradoxical submission and passivity. These contrasts piqued my interest, especially around the end of the 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s. Women had been fighting for their rights in Britain since the late 1700s, but this fight had reached a pivotal point at the turn of the twentieth century, as the suffragists were on the march and the first feminist movements were just gaining momentum. I began to search for female characters that would create a sort of portal for me to understand the woman’s life during that era. I found Jane Eyre, the main character in Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), and I reveled in all her refusals to accept her poor treatment and in her escape from bondage; however, I still noticed the same tropes as in those other novels, indicating signs of submission through the descriptions of her appearance, posture, and speech. These passages and descriptions reflected the traditional, submissive role of the woman, pushing against her impulse for independence. The complexities of Jane Eyre’s character lit a flame in my academic mind, planting in me a desire to unravel them and understand their beginnings. I realized that literature has a unique way of subsuming culture—not only reflecting it, but actually becoming it—and this discovery influenced the manner in which I viewed society and my own life. I began to understand, at least in part, how everything within culture is interconnected: it is up to the writers and poets to present and navigate those connections.

**Part II: Project Description**

**Focus:**

This project seeks to discover the cultural attitudes surrounding female sexuality during the Victorian Era in Britain (1837-1901). This project will analyze historical accounts of women’s rights in the Victorian Era along with Christina Rossetti’s poetry, specifically her volumes *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862) and *The Prince’s Progress and Other Poems* (1866). Analyzing specific imagery and metaphors used throughout Rossetti’s writing to describe female sexuality will enrich this project’s connection to Victorian culture and early feminist movements. This project also aims to answer the following questions: How is female sexuality portrayed in the works of Christina Rossetti? To what extent does this portrayal come from and affect cultural standards of female sexuality? How did the cultural values present in Christina Rossetti’s poetry influence early British feminist movements?

The end of the nineteenth century witnessed an increase of female participation in the public sphere, as the early women’s suffrage movements and were gaining traction during the late nineteenth century. Martin discusses the gendered aspects of politics in Britain and the relationship between women’s rights issues and other political concerns of the era (Martin). In a similar vein, Wingerden points out that political discourse in Britain began to include slightly improved protections for women against sexual and domestic abuse (Wingerden xiii). Furthermore, Holton writes the women’s suffrage movements were largely influenced by the early feminist philosophies of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), and William Thompson (1775-1833). Additionally, each of these philosophers based much of their feminist theory on the woman’s sexual identity and her ability to reproduce (Holton). These developments in British society spurred much literary creation during the late Victorian Era.

Christina Rossetti’s life (1830-1894) spanned much of the Victorian Era and she was intimately connected with the popular artistry and commanding patriarchal systems at the time. One major aspect of Christina Rossetti’s life and career was her relationship with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Roe defines The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood as a wildly influential collective of Victorian poets, painters, and other artists formed in 1848 and lasting to the turn of the century. The Brotherhood was committed to creating “art for art’s sake” and incorporating aesthetic elements of realism in their representations of the natural world (Roe). Jerome Bump discusses Rossetti’s intimate connections to the Brotherhood, as both of her brothers and her intended-husband were members (Bump 324). Because of her relationship with the Brotherhood, her poetry often shared many of the themes and imagery used in other Pre-Raphaelite art; however, she also tended to subvert common motifs used by prominent men in the Brotherhood. Scholars such as Acón Chan have commented on how Christina Rossetti’s poetry reverses the common tropes her brother, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, commonly used in his writing. While Dante Gabriel often utilized the typical portrayal of the “fallen woman”, Christina transformed and challenged this concept (Acón Chan).

Many scholars have debated the biblical and religious imagery in Christina Rossetti’s writing. Cumberland addresses the religious tones in “Goblin Market”, claiming that the aspects of ritual and performance in her poem provide crucial information to understand women’s “religious sensibility” in Victorian England (Cumberland). Dawn Henwood discuses Rossetti’s poem “The Prince’s Progress” in terms of its juxtaposition of biblical allusions and “sensual images” (Henwood 83). While biblical symbolism is a prominent theme in Rossetti’s poetry, Rossetti’s religious tones are almost always counteracted with an aspect of female sexuality and morality (Harrison).

Many other scholars have analyzed the sexual implications of the nature imagery in Rossetti’s poetry. Akemi Yoshida discusses how the fruit imagery in “Goblin Market” could signify Rossetti’s call for female sexual liberation, while Carpenter claims the same imagery indicates the commodification of and desire to consume the female body (Yoshida 76; Carpenter 416). Jung looks at “Goblin Market” from an intensely socio-cultural perspective, arguing that Rossetti’s unique “feminist-religious poetics” indicate both a solution for and critique of Victorian society (Jung 43). Additionally, Watson deems the interplay between fairy tale and moral tale in “Goblin Market” a subversive comment on Victorian systems that restrict “women’s sexuality and creative impulses” (Watson 64). Rossetti also challenges other female poets of her time, interacting directly with the concept of female eroticism in society and the ideas of moral and immoral sexuality (Rowanchild).

Christina Rossetti’s poetry has mostly been analyzed from the perspective of her own personal history instead of through the cultural contexts in which she was writing. Additionally, though the aforementioned scholars have noted how Rossetti’s topics are interconnected with her society, few have applied them to the movements that followed her writing. As a result, the line of inquiry in this project will be useful in its field of study because it will look at her literature through a predominately socio-cultural lens and seek to comprehend how the values she presented influenced the lives of real Victorian women. Rossetti’s poetry is an apt lens through which to study and apply Victorian cultural attitudes because, as D’Amico writes, her poetry “reveals both victimization [of women] and subversive feminism” (D’Amico 1). Furthermore, according to Harrison, Christina Rossetti’s perspective on the culture of female sexuality is especially poignant because of her tendency to reflect and subsume cultural attitudes in her writing (Harrison). Because she often presents a dialogue among dominant and marginal voices, her literary work can be seen as a sort of portal through which to view Victorian cultural complexities.

**Scholarly Process:**

My methodologies for this project will be a cultural analysis of the late Victorian Era in Britain and a textual analysis of Christina Rossetti’s poetry. In order to complete this project, I will need to have expertise in Christina Rossetti’s life, be proficient in analyzing and critiquing British literature through various lenses, and be familiar with Victorian feminist history. I plan to study Rossetti’s biography and understand the role and influence of culture in her personal development and her development as a writer. Studying Rossetti’s life will also allow me to understand and analyze further the nature of cultural attitudes towards women, especially through the lens of Rossetti’s own experiences. Studying Christina Rossetti’s biography will also give me personal insight into the life of a woman in frequent contact with powerful men, such as her brother Dante Gabriel, and the male-dominated Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

To increase my proficiency in analyzing British literature from various perspectives, I will study three literary critical methodologies in particular: New Historicism, Feminist Theory, and Cultural Criticism. I will study Murfin and Ray’s *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* to gain expertise in each methodology and the most prominent scholars in each field. I will use New Historicist Criticism by analyzing Christina Rossetti’s poetry in its historical and cultural context. Analyzing the cultural context of her poetry will illuminate the external forces driving Rossetti’s writing and the literary influence of Victorian society. Feminist Theory will supplement my historically contextual analysis by helping me measure the influence of patriarchal culture and gender binaries in Rossetti’s poetry. Studying feminist theories about culture and literature will allow me to more clearly understand the feminist themes in Rossetti’s poetry and understand how her portrayals of female sexuality may relate to larger social dialogues. Finally, Cultural Criticism is a largely intertextual study that focuses on multiple texts and discourses in order to understand the interactions between various theories.

In addition to studying various critical methodologies, I hope to participate in the British Women Writers Association (BWWA) and attend their annual conference in 2020. In attending this conference, I will be able to discuss my findings with other Victorian literature scholars and potentially learn various other approaches to Victorian poetry and culture. I will also travel to the Christina Rossetti archive at Princeton University. This archive contains personal letters which may clarify her interactions with the British patriarchal culture. I will also travel to the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford, which contains copies of Rossetti’s manuscripts. Studying these manuscripts may reveal editorial decisions signaling her responses to various external forces.

Navigating the dialogues between literature and culture will be difficult, but to enhance my understanding, I will use the aforementioned critical literary methodologies and intertextual analyses to recognize the intersections between culture and literature. I plan to consult Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1895-1975) *The Dialogic Imagination,* which is a collection of four essays and encounters the novel as a cultural force rather than a genre. I will also read the most prominent feminist philosophers who influenced early British feminist movements, such as Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* (1869), and William Thompson’s *Appeal on Behalf of One Half of the Human Race* (1825). Reading the work of these philosophers will help me recognize the central pillars of early British feminism and to connect these concepts to those represented in Rossetti’s poetry.

**Proposed Products:**

This project will culminate in a multi-chapter thesis with detailed analysis of Rossetti’s poetry, Victorian culture, and early feminist movements. To supplement my analysis of Victorian culture and feminist movements, I will complete full analyses of archival material at the Bodleian Library at Oxford and Princeton University. Additionally, I will complete full analyses of selected chapters from *Vindication of the Rights of Woman, The Subjection of Women,* and *Appeal on Behalf of One Half of the Human Race*. I also plan to submit papers to four conferences: The Interdisciplinary Nineteenth-Century Studies conference, the BWWA conference, SURF, and NCUR. Finally, I plan to submit articles to the the *Victorians Institute Journal*, which publishes articles of relating to nineteenth-century cultural studies, and the *Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English.*

**Part III: Feasibility**

**Feasibility Statement:**

In addition to obtaining hard copies of each volume of Rossetti’s poetry, I will also purchase books on literary criticism, Victorian literature, and various biographies of Christina Rossetti. All of these resources are available through Amazon or similar venues. Regarding my expertise in literary analysis, especially of British Literature, I have taken British Literature Before 1800 (ENG 221), which helped me familiarize myself with early British literature and culture. I will be able to apply the skills I learned in this class to my analysis of Rossetti’s poetry. I also intend to take Women in Literature (ENG 333), which will allow me to understand feminist nuances in literature written by female authors, and British Literature After 1800 (ENG 222) which will allow me to understand the general climate of literature written during this era. I have also been enrolled in various literature courses during my undergraduate study, and through these classes I have learned critical skills in analyzing and critiquing literature. Additionally, my mentor, Dr. Rosemary Haskell, is an excellent choice to oversee this project because of her expertise in British literature and historical criticism. She has also taught Bronte Author Studies course (ENG 346), which gives her significant expertise in British women writers in the Victorian Era.

**Budget:**

* **Books: $580**
  + Hard copy of *Goblin Market and Other Poems*: $15
  + Hard copy of *The Prince’s Progress and Other Poems*: $15
  + Books on literary critical theory and Christina Rossetti’s biography: $500
  + Photocopying of useful chapters: $50
* **British Women Writers Association annual conference (2020): $1,050**
  + Registration fee: $50
  + Travel: $500
  + Accommodations and meals: $500
* **Interdisciplinary Nineteenth-Century Studies annual conference (Spring 2020): $1,120**
  + Registration: $120
  + Travel: $500
  + Accommodations and meals: $500
* **Visit Princeton University’s Christina Rossetti Archival Collection: $800** 
  + Travel: $400
  + Accommodations and meals: $400
* **Visit London Museums and Art Galleries: $3,007** 
  + Travel: $2,000
  + Accommodations and meals: $1,000
  + Museum entry fees: $7
    - British Museum: $7
    - National Gallery in London: Free
    - National Portrait Gallery: Free
* **Sigma Tau Delta Membership Fee (pending acceptance): $40**
* **SURF Poster: $30**
* **National Conference of Undergraduate Research deposit fee: $100**
* **Study Abroad with AEF in Florence, Italy: $3,000**
  + Travel: $1,500
  + Weekend trip to Oxford for archival research at Bodleian Library: $1,500
    - Roundtrip plane ticket: $300
    - Cab fares: $200
    - Accommodations and meals: $1,000
* **Total: $9,927**
* **Tuition: $10,073**
* **Grand total: $20,000**

**Timeline:**

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|  | **Proposed Experiences** | **Proposed Products** |
| **Summer 2018** | * Visit Princeton University’s Christina Rossetti Archive | * Complete analysis on archived Rossetti manuscripts |
| **Fall 2018** | * Study abroad in Florence, Italy * Conduct archival research at Bodleian Library at Oxford | * Complete analysis of Rossetti correspondence * Honors thesis proposal |
| **Winter 2019** | * Take two HNR 498 hours | * Draft of analysis on selected poems from *Goblin Market and other Poems* * Draft of analysis on selected chapters from *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* |
| **Spring 2019** | * Conduct cultural research at London museums and galleries * Take ENG 222: British Literature After 1800 (schedule permitting) | * Complete analysis of London museum and gallery findings |
| **Summer 2019** | * SURE 2019 with Dr. Rosemary Haskell (pending acceptance) | * Draft of analysis of selected chapters from *The Subjection of Women* * Draft of analysis of selected chapters of *Appeal on Behalf of One Half of the Human Race* |
| **Fall 2020** | * Take two HNR 498 hours * Take ENG 333: Women in Literature (if offered) * ENG 495: Senior Seminar | * Completed NCUR application * Draft of analysis of selected poems from *The Prince’s Progress and Other Poems* * Conference paper for British Women Writers Association |
| **Winter 2020** | * Take two HNR 498 hours * Begin revising chapters of thesis | * Completed analysis of selected poems from *Goblin Market and Other Poems* and *The Prince’s Progress and Other Poems* * Completed analysis of selected chapters from *Vindication of the Rights of Woman, The Subjection of Women,* and *Appeal on Behalf of One Half of the Human Race* * Conference paper for Interdisciplinary Nineteenth-Century Studies annual conference |
| **Spring 2020** | * Take two HNR 498 hours to revise thesis * Thesis defense * Attend and present at the British Women Writers Association annual conference (pending acceptance) * Attend Interdisciplinary Nineteenth-Century Studies annual conference (pending acceptance) * SURF presentation | * Revised thesis * SURF Poster * Completed article to submit to *Victorians Institute Journal* and *Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English* |

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