

Dante Gabriel Rossetti: “Jenny”

- I. The poem’s background and context
 - A. The poem is a dramatic monologue, in the manner of Robert Browning, whom Rossetti admired
 - B. It is a poem about a fallen woman, a theme to which appealed to the Pre-Raphaelites (and Rossetti in particular)
 - C. Jenny, the prostitute, invites our sympathy even as her moral degeneration repels us
 - D. Prostitution in the Victorian era
 1. Prostitutes roamed the streets of London in large numbers
 2. Estimates range from about 8,000 to over 80,000
 3. This is in a city of about two million at mid-century
 4. Prostitution was not actually illegal
 5. Most prostitutes were young, single women from the working class, often former maids or servants
 6. They came from poor families and were often orphans
 7. Their patrons were usually older, often married or engaged, and from the middle or upper classes
 - E. Rossetti himself was familiar with London night life
 - F. Two former prostitutes served as models for his paintings, and one became his housekeeper
- II. The poem’s speaker, subject, and situation
 - A. The speaker is a scholar who has met the blonde and blue-eyed prostitute, Jenny, while out dancing
 - B. When they return to her room, she falls asleep on his knee
 - C. Jenny herself never speaks in the poem
 - D. He reflects upon her life and the social forces that brought the two of them together
 - E. Ever the scholar, he compares her to a book, a text to read
 - F. Later, he imagines her as a flower placed in a “vile book” (possibly pornographic)
 - G. He also compares her to his virtuous cousin Nell, reminding us that the two women are “Two sister vessels” made from the same clay
 - H. At daybreak, he places gold coins in Jenny’s hair and leaves
- III. Discussion
 - A. Like “The Blessed Damozel,” “Jenny” is noteworthy for its painterly detail
 - B. Its imagery is complex and multi-layered
 - C. It includes many Scriptural allusions
 - D. Jenny is “lazy, laughing,” and “languid” and “Fond of a kiss and fond of a guinea” (a gold coin worth 21 shillings)
 - E. The line, “Poor shameful Jenny, full of grace” seems an ironic version of “Hail Mary, full of grace”
 - F. He reflects on the contrast between rich and poor:
 1. Jenny is dressed richly, due to her profession
 2. She is mocked by a pale girl whose shabby clothes and weariness “Proclaim the strength that keeps her weak.”
 3. That is, the girl is weakened by poverty, but her poverty is a testament to her moral strength, which is greater than Jenny’s
 - G. The complicated lilies analogy

1. Lines from the Gospel of Matthew compare the lilies of the field to humankind
 2. The lilies are beautiful, but quickly fade and are thrown into the fire
 3. God cares much more for humankind
 4. Jenny's lilies are dead
 5. Must her roses die, as well?
 - a) This appears to refer both to her, and to the rosebuds that are the decorative border of her prostitute's clothing
 - b) These buds are doomed never to open
- H. Jenny and cousin Nell compared
1. The speaker alludes to the analogy of the potter and the clay in Romans 9:21
 2. As the potter, God has the power to make a lump of clay into a vessel of honor or dishonor
 3. Gazing at the sleeping Jenny, the speaker says, "Two sister vessels. Here is one."
 4. He then describes his virtuous cousin Nell, "fond of fun, / And fond of dress"
 5. Thinking now of Nell, he repeated the line, "Two sister vessels. Here is one."
 6. This implies the two women are not so unlike
 7. Jenny has been "molded" into dishonor—not entirely in control of her fate
 - a) What social forces brought her to this state?
 - b) Could she have turned out like his cousin, Nell?
- I. The complicated "rose shut in a book" analogy
1. The rose is likened to a woman's cheek
 2. It is crushed within a book that preserves it,
 3. But the book is a "vile text" that a pure woman may not look within without blushing, like a rose
 4. But even crushed, faded, and degraded, the rose retains the memory of what it once was
- J. Other imagery, as he watches her sleep
1. Jenny's lamp is compared to the lamps in the parables of the wise and foolish virgins in the Gospel parable, an ironic usage of the word *virgin*
 2. Economic imagery
 - a) Jenny's golden hair is compared to gold coins
 - b) Jenny's "flattering sleep confers / New magic on the magic purse" ("purse" is a sexual pun)
 - c) He imagines her "rich wares" shining "at the carriage window" in the park "in the discounted dark"
 - d) Again he compares her golden hair to his gold coins
 - e) He says, "Jenny, my love rang true!"
 - (1) This refers to the fact that money that "rings true" when struck is not counterfeit
 - (2) He asserts that the tinkling of his money is proof that his love for her is true
 - (3) Yet, ironically, he has bought her love with those same coins