

What Do Christina Rossetti and Emily Ratajkowski Have in Common?: Gendered Power Dynamics in the Relationship Between the Female Model and the Male Artist

Nakita Funk*

Abstract

In her work, the Victorian poet Christina Rossetti explored women's issues such as the objectification of women and the unequal standards that women were held to. One such issue, demonstrated in "In an Artist's Studio," was the controlling and manipulative relationship between the male artist and the voiceless women they immortalize in poetry and visual art. In the twenty-first century, the relationship between female muse and male artist remains complicated and often victimizing, as outlined by Emily Ratajkowski's essay on her experiences as a supermodel. Common themes between Rossetti's poetry and Ratajkowski's essay demonstrate that male artists historically and currently require female models to conform to standards that are male-defined and unattainable, forcing the model to disassociate her body from her identity to perform her job. However, female artists and models redefining beauty standards and reuniting their identities with their bodies suggest that the future of modelling will give the model control over her own image.

Keywords: feminism, Victorian poetry, modelling, female beauty standards, creative exploitation, Emily Ratajkowski

*College of Arts and Science, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK, Canada
Correspondence: nkf305@usask.ca



In her work, the Victorian poet Christina Rossetti explored women's issues, such as the objectification of women and the unequal standards that women were held to. One such issue, demonstrated in "In an Artist's Studio," was the controlling and manipulative relationship between the male artist and the voiceless women they immortalize in poetry and visual art. In the twenty-first century, the relationship between female muse and male artist remains complicated and often victimizing, as outlined by Emily Ratajkowski's essay on her experiences as a supermodel. Common themes between Rossetti's poetry and Ratajkowski's essay demonstrate that male artists and manufacturers historically and currently require female models to conform to standards that are male-defined and unattainable, forcing the model to disassociate her body from her identity to perform her job, while controlling and manipulating her body and the product. However, female artists and models redefining beauty standards and reuniting their identities with their bodies suggests that the future of modelling will give the model control over her own image.

Ashley Mears, an academic and a model, argues that modelling is a performance of gender, for which the ever-shifting entities of market and gender define, and continually redefine, the standards for the ideal female model, "thereby reproducing gendered power relations" (432). In order to manage this constant shift, agents and other industry players coerce models into a rigid discipline of "surveillance, infantilization, and uncertain judging criteria" (436-7). Mears describes the dehumanizing experience of one modelling audition where models were "stripped down, exposed as objects for inspection by anonymous gazers" (438), and argues that "these technologies of surveillance reduce models into body parts that are easily controlled and normalized" (441). This 'reduction' creates a disassociation between the identity and the body, as the body is controlled and commodified while the identity is suppressed due to its perceived irrelevancy to the product. Infantilization is another mechanism of disassociation. Mears places the industry "expiration date" at around 25 to 30 years old, and describes being coerced by her agents into lying about her age, an act which she believes to be "a potential degradation that wipes away women's maturity and capacity for power" (444). In this shifting market, subjected to various control mechanisms in order to conform to an unspecified standard, "models hold the least power" (Mears 450), and thus, a gendered power imbalance is maintained between the female model and the male artist/manufacturer.

Christina Rossetti's poem "In an Artist's Studio" critiques a similarly unbalanced female model/male artist relationship occurring in the Victorian era. The poem describes the "one face" of the woman that is the subject of the artist's paintings; she "looks out from all his canvases" (1), as if trapped inside them. She is "hidden" (3) and "nameless" (6), imprisoned and defined by the man who "feeds upon her face" (9). The last two lines most powerfully

identify the disassociation at work: "Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;/ Not as she is, but as she fills his dreams" (13-14). The artist has disconnected the model from her identity, rendering her voiceless, and immortalizing her as someone she is not – this is further emphasized by the repetition of the phrase, "Not as she is." This poem exemplifies Rossetti's discontent with Victorian art, in that male painters and poets often depicted and wrote about women who did not have equal opportunity to share their own voice.

The power imbalance between the voiceless female model and the male artist who represents her could be interpreted as the product of a larger structure of Victorian-era gender inequality – that is, marriage. Terry L. Spaise writes that Rossetti's canon exemplifies "her awareness of and dissatisfaction with how her gender was viewed by Victorian men in general, and how women were expected to repress their own emotions and more lively personalities if they wished to gain male approval" (59). More often than not, women did wish to gain male approval because their livelihoods depended on success in the marriage market. Spaise highlights that Rossetti's dissatisfaction is most clearly exemplified in her poem "In Progress," which describes a woman who "has conformed so well to society's expectations of proper female behaviour that she is an empty shell" (59). The woman is described as "dim" (Rossetti 4), "silent" (6), and "gravely monotonous" (8). The final lines – "we may one day see / Her head shoot forth seven stars from where they lurk / And her eyes lightnings and her shoulders wings" (12-14) – are a pointed criticism of the idyllic 'Angel of the House,' the Victorian concept of the perfect woman: reserved, virtuous, and self-sacrificially dedicated to her family. Both "In Progress" and "In an Artist's Studio" depict a woman who has been made voiceless and disassociated from her identity. "After Death" additionally touches on this theme and incorporates the mechanism of infantilization, which highlights the speaker's powerlessness – her lover refers to her as "poor child" (7), demonstrating that he does not think of her as an equal but as someone without agency. Rossetti's work eloquently criticizes the gendered power imbalances of her time, which rendered women powerless through mechanisms of disassociation, similar to the modern modelling industry.

Gendered power imbalances and mechanisms of disassociation in the modern modelling industry are further complicated by copyright and legal issues, as Emily Ratajkowski's essay titled "Buying Myself Back: When Does a Model Own Her Own Image?" demonstrates. Ratajkowski describes being sued for posting a paparazzi's photo of herself on Instagram, which led to her discovery that "despite being the unwilling subject of the photograph, I could not control what happened to it" (Ratajkowski). She adds, "I've become more familiar with seeing myself through the paparazzi's lenses than I am with looking at myself in the mirror. And I have learned that my image, my reflection, is

not my own" (Ratajkowski). Ratajkowski makes her living off of her appearance, and yet she does not have a legal right to it, forging a layer of disassociation in that her bodily capital does not legally belong to her. She then describes how, at one modelling job, her appearance was controlled and altered into a product that did not represent her: "I hated most of the photos from that spread because I didn't look like myself: The makeup was too heavy, there were too many extensions in my hair, and the editors had kept telling me to smile in a fake way" (Ratajkowski). Thus, modern media separates Ratajkowski's body from her identity by denying her creative control and transforming her body to fit undisclosed beauty standards, and by persecuting her legal control over her own image.

The gender power imbalance is further highlighted in a harrowing experience from Ratajkowski's early days of modelling where a photographer abused her after a long and uncomfortable photo shoot, and then, years later, released a book of unreleased photos of her, simply titled *Emily Ratajkowski*. She describes how his surveillance and manipulation of her made her unusually uncomfortable throughout the shoot, causing her to feel disassociated in her attempt to perform her job well – "I was confident naked – unafraid and proud. Still, though, the second I dropped my clothes, a part of me disassociated" (Ratajkowski). The photographer's book was very successful despite Ratajkowski's public protest and condemnation of the product, which only seemed to garner a larger audience for the photographer, who quite literally "feeds upon her face" (Rossetti 9) financially. She describes that talking about the experience felt "like I was talking about someone else's life," and that checking in on the situation "felt like I was checking in on a part of me, the part of me he now owned" (Ratajkowski). Ratajkowski was thus fully removed, disassociated, from her own image through an unusual amount of abuse and exploitation, coupled with the more routine gendered power imbalance which relies on surveillance and male artistic control. Ratajkowski offers no happy ending, no legal victory, but she concludes her account with a powerful statement: "Eventually, [the photographer] will run out of 'unseen' crusty Polaroids, but I will remain as the real Emily; the Emily who owns the high-art Emily, and the one who wrote this essay, too. She will continue to carve out control where she can find it" (Ratajkowski).

Both Ratajkowski and Rossetti describe the female model imprisoned in, and forcefully disassociated from, her image by the controlling and parasitic male artist. Rossetti critiques the gendered power imbalances of the Victorian era, which rendered women voiceless and subdued their identities, while Ratajkowski outlines how the model continues to be disempowered and subjected to artistic manipulation, while her identity and control is simultaneously denied and disregarded. This paints a bleak picture of an industry that relies on a discipline of

surveillance, infantilization, and unattainable beauty standards, but the industry is changing. Many clothing brands have begun to embrace natural, realistic, and diverse depictions of beauty, and one particular women-owned brand has brought body positivity to the high-art world of New York catwalks. Savage x Fenty, a lingerie brand by Rihanna, "focuses primarily on making women feel confident in who they are rather than coercing them into feeling like they should be something they're not" (Cooper). Rihanna often advertises new pieces on herself, thus bestowing creative control to the model, and the models that she hires are diverse in race, size, gender presentation, and ability (Cooper). The implications that this redefinition of beauty standards has for restoring control to the model, and identity to the body, is perhaps best summarized by a statement from one Savage x Fenty model, Jazzelle Zanaughtti: "Personally, I usually really don't like doing shows, they always make me feel like I have to put on a face and a walk that doesn't feel like mine. But this one was so special because I felt like me" (Stoppard). The success of this new approach to modelling suggests that the gendered power imbalance, as critiqued by Rossetti and Ratajkowski, is overcome when voice and identity is granted to the model, thus realizing the progression towards reclamation of image that is apparent in both women's writings.

Works Cited

- Cooper, Kendall. "Savage x Fenty Leads The Lingerie Industry Into A New Era." *Spire Magazine*, 10 October 2019, spiremagazine.com/2019/10/10/savage-x-fenty-leads-the-lingerie-industry-into-a-new-era/.
- Mears, Ashley. "Discipline of the Catwalk: Gender, Power and Uncertainty in Fashion Modeling." *Ethnography*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2008, pp. 429–456.
- Ratajkowski, Emily. "Buying Myself Back: When Does a Model Own Her Own Image?" *New York Magazine*, September 15 2020, <https://www.thecut.com/article/emily-ratajkowski-owning-my-image-essay.html>.
- Rossetti, Christina. "After Death," "In an Artist's Studio," "In Progress." *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature*, edited by Laura Buzzard et al., 3rd ed., vol. B, Broadview Press, 2019, pp. 1058, 1066-1067.
- Spaive, Terry L. "Not 'As She Fulfills His Dreams' but 'As She Is': The Feminist Voice of Christina Rossetti." *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, vol. 51, no. 1, 1997, pp. 53–68.
- Stoppard, Lou. "How Rihanna's Savage x Fenty Is Changing The Lingerie Game." *Vogue*, 15 August 2019, www.vogue.co.uk/article/rihanna-fenty-is-changing-the-lingerie-game.