

**THE SAD, SHORT LIFE OF
ELIZABETH SIDDAL
PRE-RAPHAELITE MODEL AND ARTIST**

by

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By most accounts she was a handsome woman, tall and slim with long flowing red hair. Because of her striking looks she became a model to a circle of artists in the mid-19th century known as the Pre-Raphaelites. At first she sat for several of the group, but soon she was the exclusive model for just one. It was not long before she became his pupil and then fiancée. But their love affair seemed doomed. Weighed down by an undefined illness and frustrated by broken promises of marriage, she turned to drugs. In response to her increasingly poor health and sexual restraint he turned to other women. They eventually married, but within two years she would be dead.

The story of Elizabeth Siddal has long fascinated art historians and other writers alike. Set in Victorian England it is a poignant tale full of melodrama.

After her death in 1862, a mystique emerged that romanticized Siddal's role as model and tragic muse, but only recently have her achievements as an artist in her own right been recognized. Now Siddal is drawing the attention of scholars who see her as not only having made a significant contribution to the Pre-Raphaelite movement, but also as an artist whose works were overshadowed by men.

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Although the PRB shared a desire to break from the Royal Academy and its rigid tradition based on Raphael, one practice these artists did not reject was the use of models. Sometimes they convinced family members or friends to sit for them. If they could afford it they hired professionals. But just as often they roamed the streets of London looking for the perfect face. So it was that Elizabeth Siddal was 'discovered.'

As the favorite story goes, one day in 1849 a young artist friend of the group, Walter Deverell, accompanied his mother to a millinery shop near Leicester Square. There he saw Elizabeth working in the back room. He was immediately struck by her red hair and slim figure. He pleaded with his mother to arrange an introduction. Elizabeth later agreed to sit for the artist. At the age of twenty her life changed almost overnight.

Another version came to light in Siddal's recently discovered obituary in the *Sheffield Telegram*. It stated that she was a dressmaker and first met Walter Deverell's father, head of the Government School of Design, to whom she showed some of her drawings. Thereafter she met Walter and the family

Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal was born in London on July 25, 1829. She was named after her mother, but was known as Lizzie, a nickname she would carry throughout her life. Her father, Charles Siddall, ran a cutlery business. She was the third of eight children and had four sisters and three brothers. The youngest, Harry, was retarded. Little is known of her early life, except that she liked to draw and read poetry. Tennyson was one of her favourites. It is said that she first read one of his poems on a sheet of paper used to wrap a slab of butter from the market. Nothing is known of her schooling, though she learned to read and write. Like her siblings, as a young adult she went to work to help support the family.

Elizabeth's looks and personality were in marked contrast. While her statuesque figure and red hair made an impression on just about everybody, she was highly reserved and her chronic poor health emerged as one of the most crucial and defining factors in her life.

A female contemporary recalled that Elizabeth's "eyes were a kind of luminous golden brown agate-colour, slender, elegant figure, tall for those days, beautiful deep-red hair that fell in soft heavy wings ... She did not talk happily, (was) excited and melancholy, though with much humour and tenderness." A male friend described Elizabeth as "sweet, gentle and kindly, and sympathetic to art and poetry.... Her pale face, abundant red hair and long thin limbs were strange and affecting, never beautiful in my eyes."

Rossetti's brother, William, was not consistent in describing Siddal. As the family biographer he wrote that she was "a most beautiful creature with an air between dignity and greatness; tall, finely formed with a lofty neck and regular yet somewhat uncommon features; greenish-blue unsparkling eyes, brilliant complexion and a lavish heavy wealth of copper-golden hair (She had a) modest self-respect and a disdainful reserve; her talk had a sarcastic tone."³

Writing as an art critic he said that she was "not physically beautiful enough" to represent Viola in Deverell's painting of a scene from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*.⁴ It was Siddal's red hair that Deverell wanted in his painting, though red hair at the time was not considered attractive because of its wanton connotation. It was through Deverell that Siddal met Gabriel Rossetti, who would become both her mentor and tormentor.

Siddal sat for both Deverell and Holman Hunt, but it was her modeling to John Everett Millais's *Ophelia*, completed in 1852, that would be one of her most enduring legacies. Ophelia is also considered the best likeness of Siddal; with his accurate depiction of nature and careful attention to detail, Millais was true to the Brotherhood's aims.

In the painting Ophelia is near suicide by drowning. Rejected by Hamlet and half-mad after the death of her father, Polonius, she floats in a river staring toward the sky. The robin, seen at the upper left, is possibly a reference to Ophelia's song, "For bonny sweet Robin is all my joy."⁵ Though Millais spent hours near the River Ewell near Kingston-upon-Thames painting the plants, flowers and water, to pose Lizzie he returned to the studio.

First Millais bought Lizzie a special dress. Then he had her lie in a bath of water with lamps underneath to keep the water warm. It is not known how many 'sittings' she had to endure, but on one occasion the lamps went out, resulting in her catching a severe cold. Her father threatened to sue Millais if her medical bills were not taken care of. Millais resolved the matter, but the episode contributed to the romantic notion that Siddal sacrificed her health for the sake of art.

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When Elizabeth Siddal met Gabriel Rossetti in 1849, she was twenty and he twenty-one. By 1852 Lizzie was sitting regularly for Gabriel and they had fallen in love. Soon she moved from her home to a room he found for her. However, they spent most of their time working together in his studio. Though she was known as Lizzie to Rossetti and his friends, he also called her 'Guggums' and 'The Dove'. She began to spell her last name with one 'l' perhaps at his request.

As a happy couple they took their first vacation together at Hastings in 1854. While there they visited three of Rossetti's female friends, to whom Siddal had already been introduced. They were the artist Anna Mary Howitt (later Watts), the feminist, social reformer and landscape artist Barbara Leigh Smith (later Bodichon), and the poet Bessie

Parkes. During the visit Howitt, Smith and Rossetti spent time together making sketches of Siddal. All three women had taken an interest in her. In a letter introducing Siddal to Parkes, Smith wrote:

Now my dear I have got a strong interest in a young girl formerly model to Millais and Rossetti, now Rossetti's love and pupil. She is a genius and will, if she lives, be a great artist. Alas! her life has been hard and full of trials, her home unhappy and her whole fate hard. Dante Rossetti has been an honourable friend to her and I do not doubt if circumstances were favourable would marry her. ...⁶

They also expressed concern about Lizzie's health, urging her to get treatment. In response Siddal wrote:

My dear Miss Smith,
I thank you most heartily for your kind concern and would at once decide about going into the Hospital if I thought that the state of my health was bad enough to warrant my entrance into one.
You will I am sure be very glad to hear that I have felt very much better this week. I can feel myself getting quite strong.
This morning I received a letter from Rossetti who will be here tomorrow or Friday. Shall we come over and see you and Miss Howitt?
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Throughout their relationship Gabriel used Lizzie as a model for numerous watercolours and oil paintings, but it was his portraits of her that have a special appeal. From 1850 to 1862 Gabriel made over sixty drawings of Lizzie. They are simple, direct, informal and highly personal.

Bessie Parkes described Lizzie as seen in these drawings as having "an unworldly simplicity and purity of aspect."⁸ While one can see that Lizzie is at times expressionless, withdrawn and impassive, there is missing her "dry wit, anger and obstinacy with which she endured her long, nebulous relationship with Rossetti."⁹

One of his early portraits, a watercolour, profiles Lizzie against a green background and wearing a green bodice. She appears relaxed and composed, showing little sign of ill health.

However, Rossetti's best known portrait of Siddal would be painted after her death.

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England in the 1850s was not receptive to women who wanted to be artists. Women were excluded from the Royal Academy Schools, even though two women were among the founding members in the previous century. Women were dependent on males for financial support, and aspiring women artists who didn't come from a well-to-do family or weren't married to an encouraging husband had a difficult time getting adequate training.

For female artists in Siddal's time it was an ongoing struggle to gain recognition and acceptance. In 1850, a small group formed an informal association called the "Art Sisters" to provide mutual support. In the following fifty years Pre-Raphaelite women artists received significantly less recognition than their male counterparts. Only in recent years have Siddal and other women artists attracted the attention of scholars. As Jan Marsh and Pamela Gerrish Nunn write in their excellent book *Pre-Raphaelite Women Artists*:

"In fact, as a movement and a style, Pre-Raphaelitism was com-

paratively welcoming to women, while not mitigating the disadvantages of access and esteem which they faced in the world of art, as in society as a whole.... Women artists played a crucial role in shaping, defining, developing and perpetuating the movement over its halfcentury."¹⁰

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In her short lifetime Siddal produced a significant body of work. There are eleven known paintings in oil and watercolour, plus twenty-five to thirty drawings which Rossetti had photographed to preserve after her death. One can clearly see Rossetti's influence as her teacher, but there are also similarities in the style that the Pre-Raphaelites adopted in the 1850s "characterised by angularity, elongation and attention to detail."

Lovers Listening to Music (1854) is an example of Siddal's early work. It shows a young couple being entertained by two dark-skinned women playing a stringed instrument. The scene may possibly be Lovers' Seaton a cliff between Hastings and Fairlight, which Lizzie and Rossetti had visited. The scene is probably an imagined one without a literary source. What the child represents is not clear but she has an angelic quality to her.

Siddal's drawing *Pippa Passes* was shown by Rossetti to Browning who was delighted with it. Rossetti also showed these and other works to Ruskin in 1855. He was impressed and bought them, paying her 30 pounds. With this money Siddal was able for the first time to buy her own brushes and paints. Ruskin liked Siddal's naive style which he saw as similar to medieval art. Known as Rossetti's pupil and Ruskin's protégé, she was the only woman to be included in a show at the Pre-Raphaelite salon in 1857. She also began receiving from Ruskin a quarterly allowance of 150 pounds.

One of Siddal's early watercolours, *Lady Clare* (1857), depicts a scene from a poem by Tennyson, whose work she was one of the first to illustrate. Here the heroine's nurse, who is really her mother, begs Lady Clare not to tell Lord Ronald of her humble origins for fear he might withdraw his offer of marriage. The similarity to Siddal's own situation is obvious. Lady Clare's reply is:

`If I am a beggar born,' she said
I will speak out, for I dare not lie.⁷²

In the poem the woman is not rejected. The two figures create an arresting composition, in which the mother is kneeling with her hands on Lady Clare's shoulders. With her head bending to the right Lady Clare's hand almost covers her mother's face. The scene shows the Pre-Raphaelite interest in medieval art and architecture, but there is also a Biblical reference in the stained glass scene which illustrates the Judgment of Solomon, another example of a real mother revealing herself. The costume Lady Clare wears is very possibly from a manuscript illustration seen by Siddal at the British Museum.

The scene in *Clerk Saunders* (1857) is from *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, a collection of ballads by Walter Scott (1771-1832). Like *Lady Clare* the story is about love between social unequals. It shows May Margaret kneeling on her unmade alcove bed, as the ghost of her lover, Clerk Saunders, enters through the wall. He is asking her to renew her vows, which she does by kissing the wand. He had been murdered by her brothers after the lovers were found together in bed. As in *Lady Clare*, the rich colours of *Clerk Saunders* are especially noteworthy. Her talent in using colour was often noted.

Ladies' Lament from the Ballad of Sir Patrick Spens (1856) is unique in that it is a landscape setting and shows only women and children. It was not common to portray a scene that didn't have a male-female theme. Like *Clerk Saunders*, the painting

illustrates a ballad of Walter Scott's, in which a group of ladies from the Scottish court wait, probably in vain, for their shipwrecked husbands.

O lang, lang may the ladies sit
With their fans into their hand
Or ever they see Sir Patrick Spens
Come sailing to the land.¹³

Gabriel continued to give instruction and encouragement to Lizzie, but he kept postponing their marriage. One reason was the lack of money. There was also her chronic ill health. There is no clear evidence that she suffered from a specific physical illness, though consumption was often mentioned. Whatever her condition, it was clouded by her increasing dependence on laudanum, a tincture of opium commonly used as a pain killer and tranquilliser that was available in any apothecary's shop. Elizabeth Barrett Browning was also known to have been dependent on "her drops."¹⁴

Lizzie's relationship with Gabriel became increasingly strained. The first recorded sign of conflict was in 1855 during a visit with their good friends, the painter Ford Madox Brown and his wife Emma. The two women had spent time together shopping, and later Gabriel accused Emma of causing Lizzie to complain about him. By this time her illness was more obvious. On visiting the Rossetti apartment one day, Brown recalled "Miss Siddal looking thinner and more deathlike and more beautiful and more ragged than ever, a real artist, a woman without parallel for many a long year."¹⁵

As Lizzie showed more signs of physical weakness and fading beauty, Gabriel became more moody and impatient. Though he was gregarious and had many friends, as a couple they had a limited social life. Besides Ford and Emma Brown, they spent time with the Pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones and his wife Georgiana. Another good friend was the poet Algernon Swinburne, who like Lizzie had striking red hair. They shared a passion for poetry and literature, and when he visited their apartment he often read to her. The three of them, together with other friends, occasionally attended the theatre. He described a more engaging side of Lizzie when he recalled that she was "quick to see and so keen to enjoy that rare and delightful fusion of wit, humour, character-painting and dramatic poetry" in Elizabethan drama.¹⁶

Though Lizzie had already met Gabriel's sister, Christina, it wasn't until 1855 that she was finally introduced to his mother. Mrs. Rossetti was against the marriage because of Lizzie's illness, her lower social background, and her limited formal education. By contrast, John Ruskin was much more solicitous and liked Lizzie. He even arranged a medical consultation for her in Oxford with the noted physician, Henry Acland. The doctor found no specific illness. In his opinion Lizzie's "mental power was long pent up and over-taxed" and he recommended a rest cure." In September, 1855, with a stipend from Ruskin, Lizzie left London for Paris, travelling with a female companion, a relative of Gabriel's. He joined her there briefly, where they met Elizabeth Browning and viewed Millais's *Ophelia* at the Paris Exhibition. Lizzie and her companion then went to Nice, where they spent the Christmas holidays.

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By this time Gabriel had found other women as models. In contrast to the pale and wasting Lizzie, these women were robust and sensual. Returning from France in the spring of 1856, Lizzie learned of his affair (probably not his first) with Annie Miller, model and lover of Holman Hunt, Gabriel's friend and colleague. Furious and distraught,

Lizzie told Madox Brown that she wanted nothing more to do with Gabriel. He promised again to marry her if she took another cure abroad, but she refused. She then decided to leave London and on her own went to Bath.

By the time Lizzie returned to London in February, 1857, she and Gabriel were apparently reconciled. That summer, while Gabriel was working in Oxford, Lizzie went to Sheffield, her father's birthplace, and attended art classes. In the autumn they were together in Matlock, but Gabriel returned to London alone. From 1858 to 1860 almost nothing is known of Lizzie, though when her father died in 1859, she must have been in London.

In early 1860 Lizzie's family became worried about her health. Lizzie was now very ill, weak, and vomiting almost every day. They contacted Ruskin who notified Gabriel. He wrote to Brown that "Lizzie is ready to die daily and more than once a day."¹⁸ In spite of or because of her illness, he finally pledged to marry her. The wedding took place on May 23, 1860, followed by a short honeymoon in Paris which they could not afford.

Under Gabriel's care Lizzie recovered. She soon became pregnant and was happier. But in April the following year she delivered a still-born daughter. She sank further into despondency. A friend remembered Lizzie rocking an empty cradle and saying, "Hush you'll waken it."¹⁹

On the evening of February 10, 1862, Lizzie and Gabriel returned to their apartment after dining with Swinburne. Earlier that evening she had appeared drowsy but refused to be taken home. Gabriel left about 8 o'clock, supposedly to teach a class. Lizzie began getting ready for bed. When he came home a few hours later Gabriel found Lizzie comatose from an overdose of laudanum. An empty vial lay on her bedside table. Though it was never confirmed, it was reported that a note was pinned to her nightgown saying, "Please take care of Harry."²⁰

Gabriel put the note in his pocket and summoned a physician and one of Lizzie's sisters. He then went to see Madox Brown, who burned the note. The two returned to the apartment. Feeling desperate, Gabriel called in three more physicians. As the night wore on it became clear that Lizzie's condition was hopeless. She died early the next morning, a little past 7. She was 32 years old.

Overcome with grief and remorse, Gabriel kept Lizzie's coffin in their apartment for six days. Before the coffin was sealed he placed a manuscript of his poems between her cheek and hair. Lizzie, the 'beautiful wraith', was then buried in Highgate Cemetery. It was said that he saw her ghost every night for two years.

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Lizzie's body was publicly exhumed in 1869 when Rossetti decided that he wanted his poems back. He was not present on the night when she was dug up, but when the coffin was opened, one observer noted that "Lizzie's face was still beautiful as ever and her red hair shown in the firelight."²¹

Her spirit was again revived through Rossetti's painting, *Beata Beatrix* (Blessed Beatrice). He worked on the painting from 1864-1870, and he produced six replicas. However, it was not officially exhibited until 1883, a year after his death. *Beata Beatrix* is Rossetti's best-known portrait of Lizzie, painted as her memorial. However, it is not a good likeness, according to Bessie Parkes.

"The expression of Beatrice was not hers.... I feel puzzled by the manner in which the artist took the head and shoulders of a remarkably retiring English girl, with whom I was perfectly familiar, and transfused them with an

expression in which I could recognize nothing of the moral nature of Miss Siddal."²²

Nevertheless, the painting carries much meaning. The theme comes from Dante's poem, *La Vita Nuova*, in which he writes of his unrequited love and mourning for his love Beatrice. Rossetti identified himself with Dante's idealized love and sense of loss. Beatrice is shown as in a trance at the moment of ecstasy between life and death. A dove, representing the messenger of death, places a poppy, symbol of sleep and a reference to laudanum, in her hand. To the right is a sundial, showing the hour of Beatrice's death. Behind, Dante is seen staring at the Vision of Love on the left. The Vision, wearing a red cloak, holds a flickering flame around a heart, representing the gradual passing of life and love.²³

Rossetti was to have other relationships, most notably with his models Fanny Cornforth and Jane Burden Morris, but Lizzie was a constant presence. Not long before he died in April 1882, after ten years of physical and emotional decline, punctuated by reclusiveness, depression, attempted suicide and drug and alcohol abuse, Rossetti wrote:

"As much as in a hundred years she's dead, Yet is today the day on which she died."²⁴

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Elizabeth Siddal was not a major artist, but she was an important one. Gifted with a keen intellect and sensitivity to all around her, she used her artistic talent to produce some unique works" turbulence of her life she was able to be creative even up until her last months. One can only speculate on how much she could have accomplished had she lived.

In 1984 Siddal was the only woman represented among 250 works in the Pre-Raphaelite exhibition in the Tate Gallery. Seven years later a retrospective of her art was held at the Ruskin Gallery in Sheffield. As Jan Marsh wrote in the accompanying text for that exhibition:

"Elizabeth Siddal's `Artistic oeuvre is small both in size and range. But it was original, serious-minded and modestly successful, and deserves to be accorded a small but significant place in the history of Pre-Raphaelite art.' "²⁵

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Elizabeth Siddal was also a poet. Her poems were private and not known outside the family until after her death. In 1866 Rossetti copied six of her fifteen poems to be included in a volume of poetry by his sister, Christina, but she thought Siddal's poems too melancholy. Eventually all of Siddal's poems were published by William Rossetti between 1895 and 1906. It was not until 1978, however, that all of her poems were published together.

It is not surprising that Siddal's poetry speaks of lost love and death. The titles of some of her poems reflect this preoccupation, such as *Dead Love*, *Early Death*, *Love and Hate*, *The Passing of Love*, and *Lord May I Come*. However, she was not always writing about herself, since these were common

themes in Victorian times. While sometimes sad and sentimental, her poems convey a poignancy that is appealing.

A Silent Wood

O silent wood I enter thee
With a heart so full of misery
For all the voices from the trees
And the ferns that cling about my knees.

In thy darkest shadow let me sit When the
grey owls about thee flit; There will I ask
of thee a boon, That I may not faint or die
or swoon.

Gazing through the gloom like one Whose
life and hopes are also done, Frozen like a
thing of stone
I sit in thy shadow — but not alone.

Can God bring back the day when we two stood
Beneath the clinging trees in that dark wood? ²⁶

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- ⁵Trewin Copplestone, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 1999, p.39
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- ¹⁵Quoted in Surtees, p.8
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²⁰ Quoted in Marsh, op. cit., p.125
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EVEN those who do not know Elizabeth Siddal's name will find her face familiar. Deverell painted her as Viola, the cross-dressing heroine of Shakespeare's Twelfth Night and Siddal went on to model for William Holman Hunt and Millais but by the end of 1852 she was sitting only for Dante Gabriel Rossetti with whom she went on to have a long love affair and a short marriage. Rossetti drew and painted her obsessively, often as Dante Alighieri's muse Beatrice. "She wanted to be an artist and there were so few female artists at the time. Art was made by men and bought and sold by men. "Women couldn't even go to life classes. God no! What she does not doubt is that the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's paintings of Siddal changed the idea of female beauty at the time.