



**D.G. Rossetti, *A Sea Spell* (1877)**

Oil on canvas

106.7 x 88.9 cms

Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

## THE SONNET WHICH GOES TOGETHER WITH THE PAINTING

Her lute hangs shadowed in the apple-tree,  
While flashing (*brillanti*) fingers weave (*tessono*) the sweet-strung spell  
Between its chords; and as the wild notes swell,  
The sea-bird for those branches leaves the sea.  
But to what sound her listening ear stoops (*chinarsi*) she?  
What netherworld gulf-whispers doth she hear,  
In answering echoes from what planisphere,  
Along the wind, along the estuary?  
She sinks into (*penetra*) her spell: and when full soon  
Her lips move and she soars (*si libra*) into her song,  
What creatures of the midmost (*centrale*) main shall throng (*ressa*)  
In furrowed (*corrugate*) surf-clouds to the summoning (*che attrae*) rune:  
Till he, the fated mariner, hears her cry,  
And up her rock, bare-breasted, comes to die?

## THE MEANING OF THE DUAL WORK OF D.G. ROSSETTI

The subject of the dual work is a fatal woman, a siren who is so beautiful and attracting that male figures succumb to the Siren charm, causing their own demise. She is beautiful, seductive, and deadly - desirable and feared - all characteristics which, in Rossetti's world, depict the magnificent and eternal "femme fatale"

Like Lilith, the power of this unnamed Siren is far-reaching and monumental. She is able to lure all the "*creatures of the midmost main*" she performs on a natural level the sort of seduction Rossetti's other women do on a human level.

## COLOURS

The predominant colour is the red. Each element of the painting shades into a red or ochre tonality.

## SYMBOLICAL ELEMENTS

The painting is rooted into the Pre Raphaelite movement not only because its subject (the fatal woman) was one of the most represented by the brotherhood's artists, but also because it is rich in symbolic details which establish a number of connections to the Bible and to other Rossetti's paintings. Describing his infatuation of the Pre-Raphaelite woman, J.B. Yeats confessed, "It enchanted me...to find in any stray model either the red hair or the curled lips or the columnar throat of the Rossetti woman." As a matter of fact curled lips, long hair, big eyes and milky skin are a constant of Rossetti's artistic output. In the upper right corner of the painting, you see a **red apple**: this image is reminiscent of Lilith's supposed tempting of Eve while in the "apple-tree" the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Bad.

A **dove** is perched on the woman's head: it appears in many paintings by Rossetti (for example; in "Beata Beatrix" it lies on the sitter's womb) and it is symbolic of the Holy Ghost.

But in my own view, the most interesting detail is **the harp**. It is the mean whereby the woman lures man. In many other paintings, Rossetti shaped women holding something that can be used to attract people. For example; in "Princess Parisadi", the woman is clasping a small cask of wine, in "Pandora" the goddess is holding the famous pot, "La Ghirlandata" is playing the harp...





**La Ghirlandata**



**Princess Parisadi**



**Pandora**

### COMPOSITION

The woman holding the harp is plunged into nature: her hair is shadowed in the apple tree. This detail conveys a sense of communion with nature but also a communion with the Bad, which is represented by the apple