

ENGL 487: Tutorial in Writing
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Allie Gruber

The Pre-Raphaelites: A Series of Encounters
by Allie Gruber '26

When I was nineteen it was my simple pleasure to walk every morning from class on York Street to my small room overlooking the oak tree in Pierson College. There wasn't much of interest on those walks: just the usual array of backpacks to admire and sneakers to covet. On days when I felt especially glorious, I wore my mother's brown-leather ankle boots which made a confident *click-clack click-clack* on the stone slabs. My mood was always joyful on these mornings, and it was then, while the hot sun shone and the trees were in full bloom, that I first saw her.

The first thing I noticed was her orange-red hair. It seemed like hair from a different century. It wasn't an artificial red, although you'd be hard-pressed to find another person whose locks were as rich in color without synthetic assistance. I say 'rich' because the red in her hair was darker than the hair on most redheads. It was at once glaring and matte, wild and restrained. She looked as though she'd endured much pain, like the tragic heroines I read about as a child. Phaedra. Ophelia. Tess. And now here she was, gliding through the hustle and throb of New Haven streets and then fading into a vision in the distance, a red glint, a ghostly fancy.

I passed her every morning. I came to recognize the way she walked, the way she pushed the red strands of hair from her face on windy days. She seemed to be gazing unconsciously beyond things—beyond the New Haven streets and the rush of cars, beyond the real, even, into some distant abyss. I became so accustomed to our brief encounters that I began to look up when I heard her boots and felt her presence, felt the cloud of pervasive melancholy that seemed to

surround her. Sometimes I fancied that we knew one another, and that in our brief intimate instances of crossing, obscure messages were exchanged and cryptic signals acknowledged.

She looked out of place on the streets of New Haven. There was something so ghostly about her, so reminiscent of a bygone era. I began to doubt my senses. Did I really see her, or was she a figment of my imagination? A recurring dream? A nightmare? And then one day I realized I'd seen her before, many times, in the paintings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Everett Millais. This mysterious woman looked exactly like the Pre-Raphaelite model Elizabeth Siddal. The same thick red hair, the same pale complexion. But it was the forlorn eyes that struck me. There was something timeless about her, as there also was about Siddal. And yet she seemed trapped in time, a phantom of the 1850s. She had the kind of beauty one associates with poetry.

In Room 7 of the Tate Britain hangs a marvelous painting by William Holman Hunt. It's called *The Awakening Conscience*. A woman looks out the window at the trees beyond. Rising from the arms of her lover, she experiences a moral revelation. Light filtering through the window suggests the possibility of transcendence. The woman is striking because of the fervor in her eyes. Her eyes blaze with emotional intensity—so inspired, so elevated, so flushed with hope, so keenly striving. Hunt captures her in the most important moment of her life. She looks as though she's about to cross some crucial boundary, from oppression to freedom, from the earthly to the unearthly.

Hunt's painting reminds me of a passage in William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Blake resists the widely-held belief that body and soul are separate entities. "Man has no body distinct from his soul," he writes. "Energy is Eternal Delight." Blake's words point to something essential within Hunt's painting. As we gaze into the woman's blazing eyes, we feel

as though we're rising beyond the limits of her body into a higher, transcendental realm. At once we seem to be gazing *at* and *beyond* this extravagant beauty. The models in Pre-Raphaelite paintings are often placed on a pedestal. But not in Hunt's painting. We seem to look directly into the model's inner life. We peer through her—past the beauty, past the body, past the material—into the all-consuming brightness of her soul.

What was it about the woman's eyes that so arrested me? What caused me to stare at the painting for ten, fifteen, twenty minutes? The mahogany piano, the gilded frame, the sumptuous red rug, the ornate wallpaper—every detail evokes a distant era, an age far removed from the present day. It's almost impossible to imagine how different customs were in 1850s England. But as I stared at the woman in the painting, I wondered—aren't there deeper differences between our worlds, ones that don't depend on changing laws or moral codes or aesthetic preferences? What would it take to transform *me* into a product of a different historical era? If you dressed me in 19th-century garb and told me what to say and how to say it, would I be convincing?

Come with me, reader, to the 1850s. Here we are—Piccadilly Circus. I'm wearing a blue skirt and bodice, and a red shawl is swathed tightly around my shoulders. It's November. London at this time of year is full of life and energy. Horses and carts bustle in every direction; flower ladies sell violets to young women calling on elderly relatives in Mayfair; workmen load boxes into carts and shout gruff, unintelligible orders. Everywhere the clatter of hooves, everywhere the din of voices and wheels and bells. Newsboys hand out printed copies of *The Times* and *Lloyd's Weekly News*. Streetlights cast an artificial glow over the street. A little beggar boy with wide eyes and a snub nose gapes pleadingly at people passing by. In the center of the roundabout, delicately poised in an arabesque, is the statue of Eros. I can't help noticing his stillness. He

alone is steady; he alone is calm. I step forward and join the throng. Now I too am part of the community, part of the flurry and bustle.

I make my way to Mrs. Tozer's hat shop on Cranbourne Street. I've never seen so many bonnets: brown bonnets and white bonnets, bonnets with pink ribbons and bonnets with blue ribbons, cover-the-ear bonnets and expose-the-ear bonnets. The mannequin beside me is flaunting the most stylish headdress of the season: the leghorn straw hat. It's all the hats in one, decked with lace and ribbons and flowers. In the back of the shop a group of assistants huddle around a sewing machine. They're animated in conversation, too absorbed to notice me. "But surely the ribbon ought to be green!" one says. "What about making it longer in the back?" asks another. "The longer the hat, the longer the face," a third declares with an air of finality. One of these women catches my eye. She has rich coppery-gold hair, but it's the texture I find outrageous. Her hair billows. It curves and curves again in layered waves of red and gold. With a pang of recognition I realize: *that woman is Elizabeth Siddal*.

Here she is, before me. There she was, too, when the pre-Raphaelite painter Walter Deverell discovered her in this very shop. In his restless, boyish mood his eyes fixed upon one woman who looked different from the other assistants. Her hair was flaming red, her eyes alight with passion. It was something in her air, in the way her thick head of hair rested so delicately on her neck. "A neck like a tower," Dante Gabriel Rossetti would later write. Deverell instantly wanted to paint her. He wanted to allegorize her, to relocate her in a world of mythological fantasies. And he did. Siddal appears as Viola (or Cesario) in his 1850 painting *Twelfth Night*. She looks into the world beyond the frame, pensive.

As I gaze at Elizabeth Siddal by the sewing machine, I begin to wonder. Why was Deverell so drawn to her? Was it just the fullness of her hair, the slender neck that rose so

delicately? Why was she so easy to idealize? I squint again at the figure by the sewing machine. In paintings she's always at some sort of threshold: between the sexual and the spiritual, the earthly and the transcendental, the true and the false. But as I watch her holding a ribbon to the light, I feel startled. She looks so human. Striking, yes, but human. Suddenly a bell rings; another customer enters the shop. Siddal looks up. We exchange glances. For a single moment, a single blink of time, she sees me. No longer the tragic heroine, no longer the divine Beata Beatrice. A woman as real as any other.

The moment passes. Elizabeth walks over to the customer and clears her throat. Suddenly I realize: I have no idea how she will sound. What does someone from the 1850s sound like? Is her voice high or low? The earliest voices I've heard belong to old Hollywood stars, like Helene Costello and May McAvoy. How would someone who lived eighty years before *them* speak? Would her voice fit or clash with her appearance? The 1920s actress Norma Talmadge was beloved for her silent films, but her popularity plummeted when her first "talkie" was released. Her accent was too 'Brooklyn,' her diction too déclassé. As I watch Siddal handing ribbons to a customer, I wonder—would Siddal have suffered the same fate? Like Talmadge, Siddal comes from a working-class background. Her father sells silverware. She lives with her family in Southwark, a neighborhood known for its pickpockets, prostitutes and prisons. Surely, this working-class milieu influences the way she talks. Once the question arises, I can't unthink it: Does Siddal have a cockney accent?

We tend to admire Pre-Raphaelite paintings for the beauty of the models, their distinctiveness, for the purity of their image and the remoteness of the model's expression. I've never stopped to think about Siddal's voice, or her scent, or any quality other than her appearance. I don't know how long her steps are, how loudly she speaks, how quickly she walks.

I don't know if she has a sweet tooth, if she likes fish, if she's ever eaten pork chops. How does she smell? In 1850s England water had to be heated manually, and even the wealthy only bathed once a week. Does Siddal smell of sweat and body odor? Or does she compensate for the smell with strong-scented perfume? And how does she drink her tea? Do her gulps resound through the room—or does she take quiet, dainty sips while her pinky points to the sky? As I watch Siddal wrapping the bonnet in brown paper and tinsel, I realize just how much I don't know about her. By focusing on her red hair and wistful eyes, I've neglected to think about all the tiny, commonplace habits that make her—and every one of us—human.

My next encounter with Siddal is in the Surrey countryside. It's a crisp autumn day, one of those delightful few when the leaves crunch underfoot and the sun casts spidery shadows on the woodland floor. The sky is scarcely visible between the leaves, but it's as vivid as the bright foliage below: a bold, assertive blue. Here is where William Holman Hunt will paint *Valentine Rescuing Sylvia from Proteus*. In an opening between the trees, the models cluster together in medieval garb. Three men and Lizzie. I watch them from behind a group of Hunt's assistants. The fabrics are brightly-colored and expensive: rich velvets, sumptuous silks, plush satin. Siddal's hair seems one with the autumn leaves and the red velvet of the costumes. She stands as she did in the milliner's shop: slumped shoulders, weight resting on her right hip. One of the men mutters something, and she laughs. It's that same rickety laugh—high-pitched, nasal, nervous.

All at once, a man with a long brown beard approaches me. "Who are you?" he asks. His beard hangs down to his belly, which bulges over his belt. His beard is like Siddal's hair: bushy and billowing, thick like wool. A few gray hairs make him seem older than he is. "Observing," I say, feigning nonchalance. It's not a direct answer, but the man doesn't seem to notice. "Hmph"—he snorts like a boar struggling to heave itself onto its feet—"Well, make yourself

useful.” The man’s voice is hoarse, husky, like the crunch of shoes on gravel. As he speaks, several specks of saliva spray from his lips and land on my chin. He’s about my height, but he has an air of authority that makes him seem taller. “Thank you, sir. I will.” Another snort, and off he walks toward the models.

But as he draws near, the general murmur of voices subsides. An assistant brings him an easel. Another carries a stool, and several more set paint and brushes on the table beside him. He runs his hand through his beard and clears his throat. He dips his paintbrush into red paint and makes several broad brush strokes on the side of his canvas. And only then do I realize: that man is William Holman Hunt. When I think of Hunt, I think of his artwork: vibrant colors, biblical symbolism, rustic countryside. His paintings are cheerful and bright, lively and emotional. I’ve never thought about the man *behind* the paintings. I’ve never separated the art from the creator, the output from the input. The art spoke for him. But the Hunt before me is nothing like what I expected. He’s almost cartoonish: Karl Marx meets Santa Claus. He spits when he talks; his belt doesn’t fit; he walks as though moving requires great effort. It’s extraordinary how ordinary he is.

“Painting shall begin!” Hunt cries, and the models scurry into position. “No, Miss Siddal, you must be closer to Proteus. Lean into him.” Siddal looks weary as she shuffles closer to the man in the center. “Now clasp his hand.” She clasps his hand. “Lower your gaze.” She lowers her gaze. More orders follow. Order; assent. Order; assent. With every command Hunt gives, Siddal’s eyes become more and more blank. She seems disconnected from the world, removed from the forms before her. John Ruskin would later criticize Hunt’s painting of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* for the “commonness” of the faces. In his letter to *The Times*, Ruskin deplores “the unfortunate type chosen for the face of Sylvia. Certainly this cannot be she whose

lover was ‘As rich in having such a jewel, / As twenty seas, if all their sands were pearl.’” Yet perhaps there’s a reason for this “commonness.” As I watch Siddal kneeling on the woodland floor, I feel a sting of discomfort. She looks lifeless, worn down by the constant scrutiny of painters and critics. After a few minutes my unease subsides: all that remains is an overwhelming feeling of pity, deep and fierce, for this fellow human.