Goblin Market, Christina Rossetti

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Biography

Birth: 5 December 1830
Death: 29 December 1894
Hometown: London, England

Publications: Rossetti is best known for her poems, but also wrote short stories, children's books and religious devotionals. Rossetti wrote over 130 poems in her lifetime.

- Books of Poetry
  Goblin Market and Other Poems (1862), The Prince's Progress and Other Poems (1866), and A Pageant and Other Poems (1881).

- Short Stories
  Commonplace (1870)

- Children's Stories
  Sing-song: A Nursery Rhyme Book (1872) and Speaking Likenesses (1874).

- Religious Writings
  Annus Domini (1874), Seek and Find (1879), Called to Be Saints: The Minor Festivals (1881), Letter and Spirit (1882), Time Flies: A Reading Diary (1885), The Face of the Deep: A Commentary on the Revelation (1892), and Verses (1893).

Introduction
Christina Georgina Rossetti was born on December 5th, 1830 in London to Gabriele and Frances (Polidori) Rossetti. The youngest of four children, she was born into a family of poets and artists. Rossetti was a very intelligent child and although being taught only at home, she learned to speak Italian while also reading in French, Latin and German. After the death of her father in 1854, Rossetti became a devout Anglican which would cause many problems within her love life later on. Despite her deep faith, she still remained close to her brother Dante who was a well-known “sinner.”

Rossetti fell in love and became engaged to James Collinson, a minor Pre-Raphaelite painter, at the age of 18, but eventually broke off the engagement because Collinson converted to Roman Catholicism. Rossetti broke off another engagement due to religious reasons in 1862 to Charles Bagot Cayley, who Rossetti claimed had no concrete religious faith.

It is after this second broken engagement that her major volumes of poetry were published; Goblin Market and Other Poems in 1862, The Prince's Progress and Other Poems in 1866, and A Pageant and Other Poems in 1881. In private and to her publisher, Rossetti claimed that The Goblin Market was not meant for children, but in public reassured her readers that it was an acceptable read for children. Rossetti then went on to write a book of short stories and a few books for children which were very well received in Victorian times.

During the years 1871 through 1873 Rossetti was diagnosed and suffered from Graves’ disease, an autoimmune disease that brought Rossetti close to death. While she survived, the time obviously gave her a deeper love of her faith and only wrote religious writings and devotional books. In 1891 she was diagnosed with cancer and after a long and tiring battle, died on December 29th, 1894 at the age of 64.

**Discussion Question:** Who is the intended audience in The Goblin Market? Is it appropriate for children like Rossetti claimed in public?

Cover illustration for The Goblin Market and Other Poems, drawn by Dante Rossetti

All references to information about Christina Rossetti refer to the biography Christina Rossetti by Lona Packer.\(^{(1)}\)
Topics for Discussion

Topics to be discussed further in Rossetti's "Goblin Market:"

**Heroic Sisterhood**

- Rossetti turns the two sisters into separate parts of what used to be one.
- The sexuality present here blurs lines
- Laura image of fallen woman
  - Sin does not cancel sisterhood relationship
  - Encouraged ideas of women's reading and writing of subjects
  - Lizzie is encouraged by Laura's sexuality
  - Fusion of two separate parts, one enables the other via rescue.
  - Explicit exploration of heroics of sisterhood
- Lizzie's rescue of Laura, as the main action of the poem deserves exploration
  - Lizzie stands her ground mixing male and female qualities
    - A lily, a rock, a beacon, an orange tree, a besieged town (II 409-421)
  - She outwits the goblins, essentially outplaying the folktale heroine stereotype
  - Lizzie essentially was resisting attempted rape and not temptation
  - She brings a "fiery antidote;" (I. 559) when in reality her personage is the fiery antidote
  - Proof goblin fruit bitter
  - Offers alternatives
    - Love
    - Different way of life
  - Returns with the fruit of the goblins without actually tasting it
  - Possible to know good, know evil and resist temptation of this sorts
- Through all of this, a heroic deed was accomplished
  - Embodies Victorian ideal/moral good: moral and emotional salvation comes from a loving response to selfless love

**Discussion Question:** What does *The Goblin Market* imply about the Victorian era and Victorian women?

Eroticism and religion: an interesting intersection

*Feminocentric*
• Catholic Eucharistic imagery
  • Consumption of fruit both erotic and spiritual
  • The temptation of the lush fruits ties to a central theme of hunger and desire to eat until full
  • Fruit as images of the Garden of Eden: Direct biblical reference
• Laura is the sister with active hunger
  • Begins journey of Eucharist and union with God and realization that nothing of this earth will satisfy the kind of hunger the two sisters experience
  • Desire is right and necessary
  • Discussion Question: There is the old saying, “it is better to ask for forgiveness than to ask for permission.” In what ways does this poem agree or disagree with the saying?
  • Laura’s hunger/desire is part of critical journey to redemption
  • Questions what food will truly be satisfying vs. presence of hunger
    • Invokes eucharist as answer; sacrificial and regenerative in Catholic Tradition
    • Rossetti also invokes images that engage the erotic physicality of the action of taking the eucharist
    • Lizzie’s desire to save her sister by braving the Goblin Market herself is Christ-like in essence and continues to fulfill the metaphor upon her self-sacrifice
    • This is Rossetti’s image of the drama of a body offered as a sacrifice and then as substantial food
    • This definition parallels the definition of the eucharist in the Catholic church
  • Rossetti reclaims erotic from an inherently and limited physical realm and places it as an arm and service of desire that is at once physical and spiritual
    • Discussion Question: Lizzie presents an immediate horror of the market alluding to an unnamed threat; what might we assume this threat to be?

Economics & Exchange: The Temptation of Consumerism

The publication of this poem has simultaneously been read as containing the themes explored above in addition to an avenue for Rossetti to offer a personal analysis of capitalism.

• Socioeconomic role of women in Victorian society despite the fact that the economic system of Victorian society posited them as irrelevant actors
  • This undermining of the value system is possible through the poem’s categorization as “fantasy”
  • Allows for Rossetti to both assent and dissent in marketable terms as a double voice
  • Intrinsically feminine in that it accommodates women through social, biological, and traditional associations not found in Victorian patriarchy
  • Rossetti’s poem privileges the reproductive over the destructive
  • Destruction caused by fruits in combat with stereotypically feminine cycle of reproduction
  • Discussion Question: Would this poem be considered more religious or feminist? Compare and contrast the religious and feminist themes.

Suggestions for further reading:

- Of Mothers and Merchants: Female Economics in Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market”
  Elizabeth Campbell
  Victorian Studies, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Spring, 1990), pp. 393-410
  Indiana University Press

- “Eat Me, Drink Me, Love Me”: Eucharist and the Erotic Body in Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market”
  Marylu Hill
  Victorian Poetry, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Winter, 2005), pp. 455-472
  West Virginia University Press

- Heroic Sisterhood in “Goblin Market”
  Dorothy Mermin
  West Virginia University Press

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Form is Content

Creating Contrast Through Formal Elements

Call and Response:

The poem creates contrast between innocence and sin, good and evil, chastity and indulgence, etc. through what musicians might refer to as a “call and response” style, with one stanza or grouping of lines devoted to delineating an embodiment of one of those concepts and an adjacent stanza devoted entirely to a counterpart concept. Repetition is the major tool utilized by Rossetti in this approach.

Example: Lines 70-86.
"One had a cat's face,  
One whisked a tail,  
One tramped at a rat's pace,  
One crawled like a snail,  
One like a wombat prowled obtuse and furry,  
One like a ratel tumbled hurry-scurry.
Lizzie heard a voice like voice of doves  
Cooing all together:  
They sounded kind and full of loves  
In the pleasant weather.

Laura stretched her gleaming neck  
Like a rush-imbedded swan,  
Like a lily from the beck,  
Like a moonlit poplar branch,  
Like a vessel at the launch  
When its last restraint is gone."

Continuing to repeat a single word at the beginning of each line but changing the word itself functions a way of making the stanzas at odds with one another. The contrast between the imagery in the two stanzas (rats and snails vs. swans, "obtuse and furry" vs. "gleaming" and "moonlit", etc.) is very much complimented by this formal "call and response" technique.

**Action vs. Abstraction:**

"Another means for creating contrast."

Antagonists (the goblins) frequently portrayed through an overload of action words:

"They trod and hustled her,/ elbowed and jostled her,/ clawed with their nails./ Barking, mewing, hissing, mocking..." (lines 399-403). The presence of the goblins turns the poem more concrete and visceral.

Protagonists (Lizzie and Laura) frequently portrayed through simile:

"Like a lily in a flood, -/ Like a blue-veined stone/ Lashed by tides obstreperously, -/ Like a beacon left alone/ In a hoary roaring sea,/ Sending up a golden fire, -/ Like a fruit crowned orange-tree/ White with blossoms honey-sweet..." (410-415). Like nature in an uncorrupted state, Lizzie and Laura continuously change form when portrayed through the medium of simile. They are pure yet vulnerable in this transient state, having no singular concrete identity and instead embodying nature's beauty in many forms.

**Meter:**

The poem uses changes in meter to create a range of comfort levels for the reader's eye and mind. When the content portrays something routine, domestic or not inherently problematic, meter is comfortable and consistent.

"Kneaded cakes of whitest wheat,/ Cakes for dainty mouths to eat,/ Next churned butter, whipped up cream,/ fed their poultry, sat and sewed;" (205-208).

Meter during tense, action-filled scenes is fragmented into groupings, though meter remains a part of the poem's consciousness. It is a power struggle reflecting the content of the poem and the conflicting interests between the antagonists and protagonists.

"Their looks were evil./ Lashing their tails/ They trod and hustled her,/ Elbowed and jostled her,/ Clawed with their nails,/ Barking, mewing, hissing, mocking,/ Tore her gown and soiled her stocking,/ Twitched her hair out by the roots,/ stamped upon her tender feet,/ Held her hands and squeezed their fruits,/ against her mouth to make her eat." (398-407)

**Rhyme**

Throughout the poem Rossetti uses this irregular rhyme scheme. She uses a pattern of "ABAB" frequently, particularly at the beginning of stanzas:  
"Morning and evening/ Maids heard the goblins cry:/ 'Come buy our orchard fruits,/ come buy, come buy:'" (1-4). She also uses an "AAAA etc." rhyme pattern in which several adjacent lines will all end in words/syllables rhyme with one another: "She sucked and sucked and sucked the more/ Fruits which that unknown orchard bore,/ She sucked until her lips were sore;" (134-136).

Changes in rhyme patterns catalyze changes in pace and tone in the poem, balancing the calmness and steadiness of the structurally sound symmetry of the ABAB rhyme scheme with the more frantic, fast, open-ended qualities of the AAAA rhyme pattern. This approach accommodates the narrative arc of the poem, which deals with the struggle between the reckless nature of indulgence and the value of maintaining a degree of control over one's senses.

**Use of Parenthesis**

There are a few instances throughout the poem that Rosetti uses parenthesis, (Men sell not such in any town) (102). It is important in looking at this because parenthesis in itself is not to make a "side note" of a phrase but to acknowledge it and bring attention to it instead.

**Discussion Questions:**

How can we see examples of an economic force within the text?

What connections can we make with the sexual and economic themes in the poem through looking at form?

How is the theme of women playing a role outside systems of power effected by Rosetti's language?
What might the use of parenthesis allude to, or take away from in the poem?

All textual references refer to Victorian Poetry: An Annotated Anthology.\(^{(1)}\)

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**Resources and Links**

**Graves’ Disease**

Christina Rossetti was diagnosed with this disease in 1871. WebMD.com offers great information on what it is and how to treat it.

**Rossetti’s Most Popular Poems**

Rossetti wrote many poems throughout her life, starting at the age of seven, and here are some of her most popular and famous from poetry-archive.com.

**The Goblin Market by Jennifer Hudock**

There is another story titled *The Goblin Market* by a self-publisher, Jennifer Hudock. The story follows a very similar tale to Rossetti's, but with more elaboration. Here is a review of the book by aturnofpage.com

**More Victorian Women Writers**

If you're looking for more information on women writers during the Victorian era, there is a great section of this website at wiki.uiowa.edu dedicated to these fascinating women.

**Dante Gabriel Rossetti**

Christina Rossetti's brother, whom she was very close to, was also an amazing poet and artist. At rossettiarchive.org you can find everything about Dante Rossetti, including poetry, pictures and biography.

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**Additional Materials**

In her essay "Of Mothers and Merchants: Female Economics in Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market,'" Elizabeth Campbell describes "Goblin Market" as part of a "new wave of innovative fairy tales" that were becoming popular in England during the 19th Century after the "first illustrated translation of Grimms' Tales became an overnight commercial success" (Campbell)\(^{(1)}\). Here is a link to the influential *Grimm Tales* found at wikimedia commons.

Go to *The Goblin Market Restaurant!*

**Modern Reenactment\(^{(2)}\)**

**Goblin Market Reading\(^{(3)}\)**

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