

Christina Rossetti's Goblin Market: A Critical Introduction

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Biography

Christina Rossetti was born in London, England on December 5, 1830 to Gabriele and Frances Mary Rossetti (Bell). Rossetti was three-quarters Italian and even spent her childhood speaking the language with her Italian father. She had a devotion to her parents, especially to her mother that she had dedicated all but two of her books to her mother (Bell). Sister of the famous pre-Raphaelite painter, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina was a product of her family and environment. As is evident in her poetry, Christina had a passionate love for Christianity and she often used her works to explore both the nature of religion and her own relationship to the Lord. Frances Mary, Christina's mother, was a devout follower of the Church of England and raised her children to become devout Protestants despite her husband's relationship to the Roman Catholic Church (Bell).

Christina had a respect and admiration for all forms of life. This trait is best captured in the account of her and Dante Gabriel discovering little birds and her insistence on 'plaintive verses' about their happy existences (Bell). The overarching tone of Christina Rossetti's life is one of calmness. She was blessed to have a life not terribly afflicted by tragedy nor war. Although she lost both her parents within her lifetime, Christina was able to handle their loss without excessive sadness.

Culture

Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" was composed in the heart of the Victorian era and was greatly affected by the beliefs that were held onto so strongly in that time. Scholars read this poem as Christina Rossetti taking a stance on some of the major social questions of her time.

"Fallen Women" was the term coined for those women who did not comply with the expectations of Victorian Culture, and often associated with prostitution. Specifically, they would not comply with social standard of abstaining from expressing their sexual desire until after they were married. This phrase expressed the idea that a "sensible" woman's sexual experiences should be completely limited to marriage. These women were considered impure and unable to be good wives or mothers.

Another major aspect of Victorian culture recognized in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" is man's relationship with God. I originally read "Goblin Market's" religious themes with the religious knowledge possessed by most modern Christians. But Christianity was very different back in the 1800's. The Victorian 1800's God was a distant symbol of power and a looming threat to scare man into living a pure life; not the unconditionally loving Father we learn about today. The modern idea that your slate is completely wiped clean upon accepting Jesus as your Lord and Savior was a foreign concept to most people in this time.

Analysis

“The Goblin Market” has a seemingly endless number of interpretations and this poem can be used to argue against everything from the Victorian ideals of chastity to the commodification of Victorian women and the echoes of a feminism to come.

“Goblin Market” was symbolic of man’s relationship with God. Most critics will jump to say that the character Lizzie is meant to be a Christ figure and they may be right; but I am not entirely convinced. After Laura tells Lizzie of the ecstasy she experienced from eating the fruit, Lizzie does not symbolically banish her from the Garden of Eden, but rather Rossetti goes on to describe the closeness of the two sisters. “Cheek to cheek and breast to breast, Locked together in one nest” (GM; 197-198) Despite the contrast between Laura and Lizzie, Rossetti never speaks of them as anything less than equals, despite Laura’s supposedly immoral actions. So the religious aspects of Goblin Market are not a spiritual redemption of a sinner, but a sign for society’s need to accept sinners where they are and not to be so quick to judge.

Christina Rossetti takes the “Fallen Woman” that her culture so despised and devised a poem to recreate her as the prodigal son, not the woman cast to the wayside. “The Goblin Market” gives these poor souls a chance to “return from depravity to chastity, if not outright purity” (Escobar). Christina Rossetti uses the fall of Laura and the heroic salvation that Lizzie brings about to restore the fallen woman.

The redemption of Laura is seen best in Rossetti’s closing of the poem that tells the audience that “Days, weeks, months, years / Afterwards, when both were wives” both women bore children to their husbands (GM; 543-544). Marriage and children is the happy end of the women, but they are not defined by their roles as mothers and wives, so much so that neither their children nor husbands are given a distinct identity or name. The only names within the poem are the three women who tango with the Goblins: Jeanie who fell and passed away, Laura who fell and was saved, and Lizzie who saved her sister. There is a great power in names and only our women are privileged to be named in the poem.

“The Fallen Woman” trope is masterfully transformed into the “Prodigal Son” in Christina Rossetti’s capable hands. “The male profligacy, fraternal jealousy, and paternal compassion of the parable acquiesce to youthful curiosity, female transgression, and sororal kinship in the poem” (Escobar). Laura is not the woman cast to the wayside after her sin, but the prodigal daughter who is spared judgment of her actions by the redemptive love of her sister.

Works Cited

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