Goblin Market

INTRODUCTION

The English Victorian poet Christina Rossetti's allegorical poem "Goblin Market" initially appeared in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862), the first volume of her poetry to be commercially published. The poem is also available in *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti* (1979) and the 2001 issue of the same edition, simply titled *The Complete Poems*.

"Goblin Market" is the most discussed of Rossetti's poems and is widely considered to be her greatest work. Though Rossetti always maintained that "Goblin Market" is a children's poem, the strongly erotic elements underlying what is superficially a moral lesson make it a multi-layered and complex work. It can be read as a study of female sexuality, an allegory (or symbolic story) about divine and earthly love, a celebration of female heroism, or as a metaphor for Christ's sacrifice on the cross, among many other possibilities. Most of the potential interpretations are not mutually exclusive.

"Goblin Market" and the collection in which it was first published led to Rossetti's standing as a writer of allegorical and lyric poetry. With the rise of feminist criticism in the 1980s, the poem's standing grew in tandem with an awareness of Rossetti as a notable female poet. As of the early twenty-first century, Rossetti's appeal has expanded and she is widely considered one of the greatest Victorian poets of any gender.

POEM SUMMARY

Lines 1-31

"Goblin Market" opens with a description of how every morning and evening, "maids," that is, unmarried and virgin women, hear goblin men advertising the fruits they have grown, with the cry, "Come buy, come buy." The goblins call out a long list of the many sorts of fruits they have brought to market, emphasizing their delicious taste and freshness, and inviting the passers-by to try them.

Lines 32-63

This section introduces the "maids" mentioned in the previous lines. They are two sisters, Laura and Lizzie. As they lie beside a stream in a loving embrace, Laura listens intently to the goblin men's cries while Lizzie blushes with embarrassment. Laura cautions Lizzie that they must not look at the goblin men or buy their fruits, as the fruits are grown in unfamiliar and unknown soil. In spite of her own words,

Laura is apparently unable to resist taking a peep at the goblin men, as Lizzie, covering her own eyes, rebukes Laura for looking at them. Laura sees the goblin men walking into the valley bearing baskets of fruit and thinks that the vines and bushes that bear such crops must be exceptionally beautiful.

Lines 64-80

Lizzie sternly warns Laura that they should not be charmed by the goblins' fruit, which would harm them if they were to taste it. Lizzie puts her fingers in her ears, shuts her eyes, and runs away from the goblin market. But Laura, overcome with curiosity, lingers to watch the goblins. They have animal characteristics: one has a cat's face, another a tail, and so on. Their voices are described as kind and loving, like doves cooing.

Lines 81-104

Laura's self-restraint breaks down. She attempts to get a closer look at the goblin men. Seeing her curiosity, they carry their baskets of fruit back along the valley to where Laura is standing. They put their baskets down and offer her dishes of fruit. One begins to weave a crown for her of leaves, tendrils, and nuts. They continue their cry, "Come buy, come buy."

Lines 105-140

Laura gazes longingly at the fruit. A goblin with a tail suggests that she taste it. The goblins speak smoothly and welcomingly to her. Laura says that she has no money, so if she were to take their fruit, she would be stealing. She says that the only gold she has is the yellow flowers of the bushes that grow on the heath. In unison, the goblin men reply that she has gold on her head, meaning her blonde hair, and they will accept a lock of hair as payment for their fruit. Laura sheds a tear and hungrily sucks at the fruits' juices. She sucks until her lips are sore and throws the rinds away. She picks up a stone (pit) from one of the fruits she has eaten and returns home in such a state of intoxication that she does not know if it is night or day.

Lines 141-162

Lizzie meets Laura at the gate and rebukes her for staying out so late. Twilight, she says, and loitering in places frequented by goblin men, "is not good for maidens." Lizzie reminds Laura of a girl named Jeanie, who met the goblin men in the moonlight, ate their fruit, and wore their flower garlands. Afterwards, Jeanie unsuccessfully looked for the goblins at every opportunity, trying to purchase more fruit. Jeanie ultimately pined away and died. No grass will grow on her grave, and the daisies that Lizzie has planted there do not flower.

Lines 163-198

Laura tries to calm her sister. She says that she wants more fruit and will attempt to find the goblin men again tomorrow night. She describes the wonderful fruits she has eaten, and offers to bring Lizzie some tomorrow.

Lines 199-252

The next day, the sisters rise at dawn. They gather honey from their beehives, milk the cows, bake cakes, make butter and cream, and feed the poultry. Then they sit and sew, and talk together. Lizzie is her usual contented self, but Laura seems distant and somewhat sick. Laura longs for nightfall.

Twilight comes, and the sisters go to the stream to collect water. As soon as they're done, Lizzie tries to bring her sister home with her, but Laura complains that the riverbank is steep and loiters there. Laura intently listens for the goblins' cry of "Come buy, come buy," but she cannot hear or see a single goblin. Lizzie, on the other hand, can hear and see the goblins. She refuses to look in their direction and begs Laura to come home with her before it gets too dark, when they could become lost.

Lines 253-298

Laura becomes cold when she realizes that her sister can hear and see the goblins and that she herself cannot. She trudges home with her sister in silence, the water dripping from her jug. After Lizzie is asleep, Laura sits in bed and weeps bitterly.

As the days pass, Laura keeps looking for the goblin men, but she never sees them or hears them. Her hair turns gray and she becomes weaker. One day, she remembers the fruit stone that she kept. She puts it next to a south-facing wall and waters it with her tears, hoping that it will sprout, but it does not. Desperate for another taste of the goblins' fruit, she dreams of it, which only increases her hunger. She neglects her domestic duties, becomes listless, and will not eat.

Lines 299-328

Lizzie is upset by her sister's suffering. As she hears the goblins' call every night and morning, she longs to buy fruit to comfort her sister, but fears the consequences in light of Jeanie's fate. Jeanie should have married but instead fell sick and died "for joys brides hope to have." The "joys" refer to the goblins' fruit. Thus, the fruit is presented as acceptable for married women, but not for unmarried ones.

When Laura is almost dying, Lizzie decides that she must act. She puts a silver penny in her purse and goes to the goblin market. For the first time in her life, she actively seeks the goblins.

Lines 329-407

The goblins greet Lizzie warmly with hugs and kisses, making strange faces and grimacing. They offer their fruits to her, inviting her to taste them. Lizzie, remembering Jeanie, is careful not to do so. Instead she throws them her silver penny, and asks to buy a large number of fruits. They refuse to take the penny, asking her to sit and eat with them as their honored guest. Lizzie refuses politely, saying that she must go home. If they will not sell her any fruit, she says, she would like her penny back.

The goblins grow angry and accuse Lizzie of being too proud and ill-mannered to sit with them. They begin to attack her physically, stamping on her feet, pulling out her hair, and tearing her dress. They try to force their fruits into her mouth.

Lines 408-474

As the goblins try to kick, pinch, and cajole Lizzie into submission, she simply stands still in silence and does not respond to the attack. She refuses to open her mouth and allow them to force in the fruit, but in the struggle, the fruits' juices are smeared all over her face and neck. At last, the goblins give up, worn out by Lizzie's resistance. They throw her silver penny back at her and retreat, kicking their fruit along the path before them. Lizzie runs home, laughing inwardly.

As Lizzie approaches her house, she shouts for Laura to come out and kiss her. In her passionate cry, "Eat me, drink me, love me," Lizzie asks her sister to suck the goblin fruit juices from her face. She explains that she has braved evil for Laura's sake.

Lines 475-542

Laura reacts to Lizzie's news with horror because she believes that Lizzie has eaten the goblin fruit. Laura fears that her sister's life will be ruined just as her own has been. But, unable to resist a taste of the goblin fruit, Laura kisses Lizzie hungrily. The juices begin to burn her mouth, and she goes into a mania, leaping, singing, and tearing her dress until she faints.

Lizzie sits awake by her sister's side all night long. The next morning, Laura awakes, laughs in her old innocent way, and hugs Lizzie. Her unhealthy desire for the goblin fruit has disappeared.

Lines 543-567

The last lines of the poem function as an epilogue, or a concluding section that rounds out the narrative. The poem jumps ahead in time by many years, when both sisters are married and have children. Laura tells her children the story of her encounter with the goblin men, of how their fruit poisoned her, and of how her sister risked her own life to save her. Laura joins the hands of her children together as she teaches them the moral of the story: that in order to stay virtuous "there is no friend like a sister."

THEMES

Earthly and Divine Love

"Goblin Market" draws a contrast between earthly and divine love. Earthly love (physical or sexual) can be a distraction from divine (spiritual or nonphysical) love. Earthly love, embodied by Laura, is portrayed as selfish. Divine love, in contrast, embodied by Lizzie, is selfless and self-sacrificial. Motivated by a selfless (divine) love for her sister, Lizzie sacrifices herself by exposing herself to the goblins' temptations and their ensuing attack. She withstands both, maintaining her virtue. This selfless act is rewarded, as Lizzie is now able to save her sister's life with the fruit juices smeared upon her face.

As an application of this theme, it is possible to interpret the two sisters as aspects of the same psyche: the selfish, materialistic side (Laura), and the selfless, spiritual side (Lizzie). Winston Weathers presents this interpretation in his essay "Christina Rossetti: The Sisterhood of Self." As all humans have these aspects, the combined sisters thus become a kind of everywoman. In this interpretation, the poem becomes a story of conflict within the psyche between the materialistic and spiritual aspects of humankind, and the epilogue showing the two sisters as married with children represents the psyche's return to unity. This interpretation is visually supported by the indistinguishable appearance of the two sisters (both are golden-haired beauties), and by their habit of sleeping and resting in a close embrace.

Female Sexuality

Many critics point to the homoerotic tone of the poem, commenting that Laura and Lizzie are more like lovers than sisters. They lie in close embrace, "With clasping arms and cautioning lips, / With tingling cheeks and finger tips." The poem abounds with torrid lines such as "She kissed and kissed her with a hungry mouth." Yet the love between the sisters is portrayed as pure and divine. The heterosexual relationships, in contrast, between the sisters and the male goblins, are portrayed as an evil seduction (when Laura eats the goblins' fruit) and as an attempted rape (when the goblins try to force Lizzie to eat their fruit). The homoerotic theme is

underlined by the lack of a male hero and by Lizzie's assumption of this classical role.

Female Heroism and Solidarity

Though female protagonists were common in literature in and before the Victorian age, female heroes (people distinguished by extraordinary courage or ability) were extremely rare. Convention demanded that any heroic action in defense of purity, such as the act that Lizzie performs in the poem, was made by men. Lizzie is therefore unusual in her single-handed rescue of her fallen sister. It is true that her heroic action is of a passive nature: she does not fight the goblins, but merely stands still and keeps her mouth firmly shut against the fruit until they give up. But it could be argued that passive resistance, as in Mahatma Gandhi's campaign to drive the British occupiers out of India, can be effective. It is also, crucially, the tactic that Christ used when dealing with his persecutors. His death on the cross was marked by passive suffering. As Lizzie shares some Christ-like qualities, her passive demeanor fits Rossetti's purpose.

Lizzie's saving of Laura gives rise to the last lines of the poem in praise of sisters as the best possible supporters and friends. While these lines are so trite and moralistic that they appear to be from a different poem altogether, the poem's predominantly sensual and passionate treatment of the deep bond between the sisters clearly shows Rossetti's promotion of female heroism and solidarity.

Societal Anxieties and the Supernatural

The Victorians were extremely interested in fairies and the land in which they were supposed to live, which was termed *Faerie*. Fairies both frightened and fascinated Victorians in equal measure, becoming a repository of many qualities and activities that were considered alien or threatening to respectable society. These included sexual power and appetite (particularly of the female variety), physical deformity, human difference or strangeness, and everything deemed irrational and unscientific. Some of these anxieties are evident in "Goblin Market." The goblins are male, and they tempt maidens with their illicit fruit. In essence, they are agents of male sexual passion, and the appetite they awaken in Laura for their fruit is clearly symbolic of feminine sexual desire. The goblins' sexual nature is underlined by their animal characteristics, as animals were often used to symbolize base appetites. Base appetites, such as sexual desire, were viewed by Victorians as the cause of most sin. This is also why the devil is often portrayed as being half animal and half human in form.

Furthermore, it was traditionally believed that silver offered protection against the mischief of fairies. This is why Lizzie insists on paying for the goblins' fruit with a silver penny.

STYLE

Allegory

An allegory is a representation of an abstract or spiritual meaning through concrete or material forms. Although Rossetti reportedly denied that "Goblin Market" had any deeper meanings, it seems clear that, whatever her conscious intention, deeper meanings are indeed present. Certainly, critics have always dismissed her claim, and have discussed the poem as an allegory of a variety of possible themes. These include temptation, the biblical Fall of Adam and Eve, and redemption; the contrast between earthly and divine love; the triumph of selfless love over selfish lust; the importance of female solidarity in a world dominated by hostile males; and the superiority of society over the individual. Some critics propose that the poem represents the affirmation of the domestic role for women in preference to activity in the masculine world of commerce (as represented by the consequences of going to the goblin market), while others suggest that the poem represents female heroism in a male-dominated world. But in fact, none of these interpretations excludes another. Rosetti's poem has remained under discussion for over 100 years for this very reason; it is successful because it is an open-ended allegory with many feasible, nonexclusive symbolic meanings.

Symbolism

The major symbol of the poem is the goblin fruit. The fact that eating the goblin fruit or even looking at the goblin men is out-of-bounds for "maids" suggests that it is symbolic of illicit sexual passion that tempts women away from chastity and virtue. This is underlined by Rossetti's portrayal of the fruit as juicy, and full of apparent vitality. The image of Laura sucking hungrily on the fruit "until her lips were sore" is loaded with sexuality.

As an extension of this symbolism, the goblin fruit can be seen as representing the biblical forbidden fruit that tempts Eve into sin. It is noteworthy that after Adam and Eve taste the forbidden fruit, for the first time they feel sexual shame and cover their genitals with fig leaves. After this so-called Fall, they lose their innocence (they are ejected from the Garden of Eden) and their lives are filled with suffering. This turn of events is similar to Laura's experiences after she has eaten the goblins' fruit.

Laura's suffering is such that she can never fully satisfy her hunger for more goblin fruit. This is emblematic of the inability of mankind (all of whom are fallen as they are the descendants of Adam and Eve) to gain true happiness from the pleasures of the material world. The poem shows that these pleasures only serve as distractions from the true and fulfilling love of God (symbolized by Lizzie's contentment, and her subsequent self-sacrifice for her sister).

Jeanie is not saved by the intervention of a loving sister, and though she "should have been a bride," she can never marry because she has been defiled. The implication is that the defilement is sexual, as previously unmarried women in Victorian society were considered unmarriageable if they were not virgins, even if they had been raped. Thus, the only way forward for Jeanie is death because societal views at the time considered a defiled woman useless and subsequently better off dead (this belief is still held by some cultures today). Rossetti here reflects the strong expectation of her time that women should be virgins when they married and that the only place for sexuality was within marriage. Sexual passion outside marriage was viewed as sinful, but the sacrament of marriage was a way of legitimizing such passion as a tool solely for the purpose of procreation. The last lines of the poem, which show the previously fallen Laura as a happily married woman teaching her children moral lessons about the value of a sister, support this interpretation.

Rhyme Scheme and Meter

The poem uses an irregular rhyme scheme. There are many couplets (where two consecutive lines rhyme with each other) resulting in *aabb* rhyme patterns. Sometimes rhymes are repeated over three consecutive lines. At other points, several lines go by before a rhyme is completed. Internal rhymes, where the syllable that completes a rhyme appears in the middle rather than at the end of the line, are also used, as in "Her hair grew thin and gray; / She dwindled, as the fair full moon doth turn / To swift decay and burn / Her fire away," where the rhymes fall on the words *gray*, *decay* (the internal rhyme), and *away*. In addition, the ending syllables of the last two lines rhyme with their ending words *turn* and *burn*.

The meter is irregular, though generally there are four or five stresses in each line.

Recurring Imagery

Images of fire are used to describe Laura's hunger for the goblin fruit. During the sisters' walk to the stream, shortly after Laura has eaten the fruit, she is described as being "like a leaping flame" in her eager anticipation of meeting the goblins again. During her illness, she is compared to a waning moon that "doth turn / To swift decay and burn / Her fire away." The fire imagery is used to emphasize the destructive nature of Laura's actions and also connotes the flames of hell.

Imagery of night and day, or darkness and light, is used to symbolically illustrate the events of the poem. The goblins, as sinister creatures of darkness, appear during the evening twilight. Lizzie warns her sister, "Twilight is not good for maidens." After Laura's first taste of the goblin fruit, she "knew not was it night or day," which symbolically points to her loss of moral sensibility. The line indicates that Laura can no longer recognize right from wrong. Before Laura's illness takes hold, she gets up at dawn with her sister to perform her duties. But already, she is

"longing for the night." As expected, Laura loiters by the stream in the evening, attempting to obtain fruit from the goblins, ignoring her sister's plea to return home "before the night grows dark." Now, darkness is Laura's element, and she seems to grow more and more ill as "the noon waxed bright." After Laura is redeemed by her sister, in contrast, the darkness retreats and the "light danced in her eyes."

Images of life and death also recur, often with relation to natural phenomena and seasons, and they convey spiritual qualities. The fruit's glowing vitality is an illusion. It has deathly qualities, as surrounding imagery tells the reader: it is offered in the twilight, and it is unnatural, as it is grown in a place "Where summer ripens at all hours." When Laura tries to sprout the fruit pit that she saves from her feast, it will not grow because "It never saw the sun." Lizzie, seeing Laura's decline, thinks of Jeanie, whose grave is barren, as the flowers planted on her grave refuse to bloom. Jeanie died at the first snowfall of winter, traditionally viewed as a season of death. Laura's return to health is marked by the birds and plants coming back to life at the onset of spring, traditionally viewed as a season of birth. Indeed, her breath is described as being as "sweet as May." The life-affirming imagery reaches its peak in the final picture of Laura with her children.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

Both of Rossetti's brothers, Dante Gabriel and William Michael, were members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood art movement, founded in 1848. The Pre-Raphaelites focused on the detailed study of nature and their subject matter was drawn from morally uplifting stories and legends, often from the Bible, or from medieval tales of honor and chivalry. The movement was strongly Christian. The Pre-Raphaelite movement was a rebellion against Victorian materialism and artistic neoclassicism, a movement that promoted order and symmetry. Members believed that the Italian artist Raphael (1483-1520) was responsible for introducing a mechanic tendency into art, and hence they adopted the name *Pre-Raphaelite*. They looked to the Italian and Flemish art of the 1400s for their models, emulating the intense colors, complex compositions, and fine detail.

Female Sexuality in Victorian England

Victorian England has become a byword for sexual repression, particularly in relation to women. Women were expected to be virgins when they married for the first time, though the same standard was not applied to men; doctors removed women's sexual and reproductive organs because they were thought to be a cause of mental illness (the words *hysterical* and *hysteria* are derived from the Greek word for the uterus); and respectable women were not supposed to enjoy sex or to seek it.

Hypocrisy abounded, as can be seen from the social problems of the time. Prostitution was common, and the children that were idealized as innocence personified were sent to hard labor in factories and sent as sweeps up chimneys.

On the other hand, many progressive ideas and movements emerged in Victorian times, and modern historians see it as an age of contradictions rather than solid repression. Some doctors and psychologists of the day actually promoted sexual expression for women, and the social and political reform organizations acting, for example, on behalf of prostitutes or working women, proliferated. Notably, the stereotypical image of Queen Victoria and her husband Prince Albert as sexually naive and repressed has been shown by biographers to be inaccurate. The Queen of England was simply careful about her public image because she knew that loose morals among the monarchy and aristocracy had historically led to public hostility towards those institutions.

In matters of both sexual repression and sexual license, women were held to a double standard. While sexually active women were seen as guilty and in need of punishment, men were not condemned or punished for sexual license. Indeed, men may have even been encouraged to make sexual conquests.

An example of these double standards was a set of laws called the Contagious Diseases Acts, the first of which was passed in the United Kingdom in 1864. These laws forced prostitutes to undergo inspections for venereal diseases. If signs of the disease were found, the woman could be locked up in a prison hospital for up to three months, where she was subjected to the brutal treatments of the time. Though it was claimed that the purpose of the law was to prevent the spread of venereal disease, the male clients of the prostitutes were never inspected. It was assumed that inspecting men was an unacceptable intrusion into privacy, whereas the women were so far degraded that further humiliation was of no consequence.

At first glance, "Goblin Market" seems to conform to conventional notions of female sexual transgression, and Laura's wasting sickness after eating the goblin fruit my be seen as a deserved punishment. Her illness also undoubtedly reflects contemporary concerns about venereal diseases such as syphilis. But Rossetti subverts contemporary attitudes about fallen women in her redemption of Laura, who, unusually in literature, goes on to marry happily and have children.

Women and Economic Power in Victorian England

Married women in Western societies were not allowed to personally own property until the late nineteenth century. If a property-owning woman married, her property automatically became her husband's. Most single women also had no money of their own, going immediately from their father's care to their husband's when they married. Laura, in common with many women in Victorian England, has no money of her own ("I have no coin," she says) so she must pay for the fruit

with part of herself, a lock of hair. This may be a comment on the commodification of women in the marriage market, in that the only commodity that women could use to bargain with was their bodies, as that was the only thing they truly owned. Lizzie is careful to take a silver penny with her when she goes to the goblin market, insisting on paying with money rather than giving the goblins a piece of herself. The goblins' fury at this can be interpreted as male resistance to Victorian women's attempts to gain economic freedom and equality.

The Industrial Revolution and Society

The Industrial Revolution began in England in the late eighteenth century and reached its peak in the mid-nineteenth century, around the time that Rossetti wrote "Goblin Market." Writers such as the poet William Blake (1757-1827), the novelist Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-65), and the critic (and friend of the Rossettis) John Ruskin (1819-1900) wrote at length about the social problems and anxieties caused by the Industrial Revolution. In particular, there was concern that relationships and interactions previously based on human values were becoming tainted by financial transactions. In parallel with these concerns, there arose a heightened appreciation and idealization of the rural activities and trades that were rapidly being abandoned as thousands flocked to the cities in order to work in factories. The rural trades, it was believed, tied man to nature and resulted in innocent and happy lives. The factories, on the other hand, were seen as hellish, filthy, unhealthy places that enslaved, degraded, and separated people from sustaining nature.

Rossetti introduces such concerns and idealizations into her poem. The goblins are men and they are merchants, so they can be seen as symbolizing agents of the almost exclusively male-controlled Industrial Revolution. The two sisters, in contrast, are engaged in purely rural activities such as milking cows, keeping bees, and making cakes. Their troubles begin when they venture into the commercial world of the goblins. The goblins' attempts to seduce Laura and Lizzie with their fruit could be seen as parallel to commercial advertising. The gain for the goblins if the women buy, however, is not money, but the women's bodies and souls. This may be a comment on the degrading nature of a society based on commerce.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

In 1861, Dante Gabriel Rossetti sent "Goblin Market" to the influential critic John Ruskin in the hope that he would recommend it to William Makepeace Thackeray, the editor of *Cornhill* magazine. But Ruskin (cited by Mary Arseneau in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*) was largely unimpressed. He praised the poem's "beauty and power" but claimed that nobody would publish it because of its many "quaintnesses and offences." About the irregular meter that has been so praised by more recent critics, Ruskin commented, "Irregular measure … is the

chief calamity of modern poetry … your sister should exercise herself in the severest commonplace of metre until she can write as the public like." Fortunately, Alexander Macmillan of the Macmillan publishing company disagreed, and the following year he brought out Rossetti's first commercially published volume of poetry, *Goblin Market and Other Poems* in 1862.

The collection was an immediate critical success and received many favorable reviews in the year of publication, including in the *London Review*, the *Spectator* and the *Saturday Review* (all cited by Mary Arseneau in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*). A reviewer for the *Athenaeum* (April 26, 1862) describes "Goblin Market" as "suggestive and symbolical without the stiffness of set allegory." In a comment on the entire collection that could apply to "Goblin Market," the reviewer compares the experience of reading Rossetti's poems after other contemporary poetry to "passing from a picture gallery, with its well-feigned semblance of nature, to the real nature out-of-doors which greets us with the waving grass and the pleasant shock of the breeze." The reviewer notes that "Goblin Market" can be read as a simple legend, or with attention to "an inner meaning for all who can discern it."

Caroline Norton, reviewing the collection for *Macmillan's Magazine* (September 1863), remarked on the ambiguity of "Goblin Market": "Is it a fable?—or a mere fairy story—or an allegory against the pleasures of sinful love—or what is it? Let us not too rigorously inquire, but accept it in all its quaint and pleasant mystery." Norton, in common with the reviewer for the *Athenaeum*, notes that the poem can be read on different levels: on the level of a simple ballad for children, or as a work that "riper minds may ponder over."

The poem continued to attract critical interest throughout the twentieth century. In the Autumn 1956 issue of the *Victorian Newsletter*, the critic Marian Shalkhauser examines "Goblin Market" as a "Christian fairy tale") in which Lizzie symbolizes Christ and Laura represents "Adam-Eve and consequently all of sinful mankind." In his book *Wonder and Whimsy: The Fantastic World of Christina Rossetti*, Thomas Burnett Swann emphasizes the alien, imaginative, and fantastic elements of the poem. He calls "Goblin Market" "a masterpiece, because, like a child's daydream, it is both terrifying and unspeakably beautiful."

From the 1980s, the poem attracted much attention from feminist critics, among them Dorothy Mermin. Mermin argues that the cheerfulness and energy of the poem and its serene ending make it "not a poem of bitter repression but rather a fantasy of feminine freedom, heroism, and self-sufficiency and a celebration of sisterly and maternal love." As of the early twenty-first century, partly as a result of the feminist critics' work and partly because of a growing fascination with biographies of Rossetti, the poem's appeal has widened. It continues to be read and studied, and its complexities continue to be analyzed.

CRITICISM

Claire Robinson

Robinson has an M.A. in English. She is a former teacher of English literature and creative writing, and is currently a freelance writer and editor. In the following essay, Robinson examines Rossetti's "Goblin Market" as a spiritual allegory on temptation, fall, and redemption.

In line with Rossetti's strong religious beliefs, "Goblin Market" can be read as a spiritual allegory on the temptation, fall, and redemption of humankind as represented in the Bible. Laura's succumbing to the temptation of the goblin fruit is symbolic of the Biblical Eve's temptation by the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. God tells Eve not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: "For when you eat of it you will surely die" (Genesis 2:17). Tempted by Satan in the form of a serpent, Eve disobeys God, eats the fruit, and brings God's curse and much suffering upon herself and Adam (and all mankind from that point forward). Similarly, Laura is tempted by the goblins, whose animal-like characteristics, such as tails and the faces of beasts are reminiscent of traditional portrayals of Satan and his fellow devils.

After Laura has tasted the goblin fruit, she suffers an insatiable hunger for more fruit, becomes self-absorbed, loses interest in life, and develops an illness that we know—from the story about Jeanie—will end in death. This can be seen as a state of sin, which embroils the sinner in a never-to-be-satisfied desire to feed a given vice. It is also a state of addiction, whether the fruit is taken to stand for illicit sexual passion or a drug, or both. Opium addiction was common in Rossetti's time, the so-called fruit of the poppy being the drug of choice for writers and artists. In drug addiction, the addict becomes deadened to the stimulant effect and requires stronger and stronger doses of the drug to regain the original experience. However much Laura hungers for the fruit, she can never be satisfied and will always seek more. Surely these are symptoms of addiction. The common ingredients of sin and addiction are a selfish attachment to the material world, a state that the poem portrays as being at odds with spiritual purity.

Lizzie's response to Laura's fall is selfless and self-sacrificial love. She courageously refuses to give in to temptation and withstands the goblins' attack, maintaining her maidenly chastity and virtue. As a symbol of her triumph, she carries home the juices smeared on her face. Her invitation to Laura to kiss and "make much of" her thus becomes an invitation to share in this pure love, which both nourishes Laura and saves her from death. On the psychological level, Lizzie ends Laura's morbid self-absorption and obsession. Lizzie's gift of herself and her love inspires Laura to respond in kind. As a result of Lizzie's heroic action, she brings "Life out of death."

Thus the poem unfolds the Biblical dictum, "For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23). The sin is Laura's decision to eat the goblin fruit; the wages are her subsequent sickness; and the bringer of life is Lizzie, the Christ-like figure. Indeed, Laura's redemption is accomplished by sucking the fruit juices from Lizzie's body. This act is reminiscent of the Christian rite of the Eucharist, or Holy Communion, in which members of the congregation eat the consecrated bread and wine in the belief that they embody or represent the body and blood of Christ. The rite stems from an incident recounted in the Bible in which Christ gave thanks to God for the bread, broke it, and then offered it with wine to his disciples, with these words:

Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me.

After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me.

(1 Corinthians 11:24-25)

Lizzie's words to Laura, "Eat me, drink me, love me" are extremely close to those of Christ.

Furthermore, according to Christian belief, Christ sacrificed himself to wash away the sins of humankind and to ensure eternal life; he "bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed" (1 Peter 2:24). Similarly, Lizzie stands still and patient, her "White and golden" figure demonstrating her Christ-like purity, while the goblins torture her flesh and tempt her soul. As a result of Lizzie's self-sacrifice, Laura is healed and regains her old innocence.

Unlike the stereotypical fallen woman of Victorian literature, who, as soiled goods, could not marry and was doomed either to an early death or to back-breaking penitential work, Laura is reborn to lead a righteous and fulfilling life. The epilogue shows her married with children. In terms of Victorian conventional religious values, she has sublimated her sexual passion within the sacrament of holy matrimony. Laura's redemption from her fallen state is one of the elements that has given rise to a feminist interpretation of the poem, in that it shows that illicit sexual passion need not end a woman's claim to an honorable and dignified family life. However, Laura's latter happiness also follows the Christian view of redemption.

Some critics have questioned why the fruit juices that poisoned Laura should, on the second taste, cure her. At first glance it would seem that the allegory of the Eucharist breaks down at this point, since bread and wine, consecrated or not, are not poisons (nor are they akin to the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil). However, the idea that something can be both a poison and therapeutic would

not have been strange to Rossetti. The statements *like cures like* or *cure by similars* is an accepted principle of homeopathic medicine, a system widely practiced in the London of Rossetti's time and by people in her family's circle. Homeopathy is based on curing a symptom by administering minuscule doses of a substance that in larger doses would cause the same symptom, somewhat like the principle that underlies vaccination or substance abuse withdrawal (take cigarette smokers and nicotine patches, for instance). Thus it is conceivable that Laura could be cured of her goblin fruit-induced disease by a second taste of the fruit.

Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that Rossetti would abandon her Eucharistic allegory for a homeopathic one so late in her poem. The answer to the conundrum lies in the same Biblical passage in which Christ establishes the rite of the Eucharist. Christ gives his disciples a vital warning of which Rossetti, who was devoted to her religion, will have been aware, and which, it can be argued, she built into her allegory.

In the passage, Christ emphasizes that the act of consuming the blessed bread and wine must be done in remembrance of him. He says that whoever consumes the bread and wine "unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 11:27). He therefore advises that before people eat the consecrated bread and drink the wine, they should examine themselves to confirm that they are worthy. This is why in the Catholic Church, adherents are supposed to confess their sins to a priest and do penance for them before they take communion. The Protestant Church encourages the same process, but without the priest: it takes place between the adherent, his conscience, and God. Christ explains that he who eats and drinks "unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep" (1 Corinthians 11:29-30). In other words, the same food that sustains and heals when taken in remembrance of Christ, poisons and damns the eater when taken in disregard of him.

This principle can be seen in Laura's two experiences of the goblin fruit. Laura takes her first taste unworthily, in order to gratify a selfish appetite. She disregards her love and duty to her sister, and all other moral and spiritual considerations. Accordingly, the fruit weakens and sickens her. Her second taste of the goblin fruit is taken at a point when she has repented her "wasted" time and is fully aware of her sister's loving sacrifice. She consumes the juice by kissing Lizzie, both out of hunger for the fruit juices and out of love and gratitude for her sister. While Laura's first taste of the goblin fruit seemed sweet, now it tastes bitter with repentance. She undergoes a violent cure, writhing like a person in the throes of an exorcism as the second, therapeutic dose of the fruit overpowers the first, poisonous dose.

The goblin fruit, while it can and does represent sexual passion, is also more generally symbolic of the material world. It is a truism of many religions that attachment to the things of this world leads to suffering and is a sin. The so-called

three fires or three poisons of Buddhism are ignorance (of the divine essence of the soul and of the divine source of material creation), greed or desire, and hatred. Due to ignorance of the divine unity of all things, the soul becomes enslaved and bound to the things of the world by desire and hatred, which are insatiable and therefore lead to potentially endless suffering or damnation. The way out of this cycle of suffering, say religious teachers of many faiths, is to recognize that the things of this world cannot be owned, but belong to God (or some form of divinity).

Material things can therefore be binding or liberating; they can addict and enslave a person, or they can act as symbols and reminders of God's love and benevolence. As the ancient Indian religious text *Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana* notes, "the same substance which contributes to a particular malady cannot ordinarily counteract the disease; but, when taken in a properly medicated form, it does cure the ailment." This is a perfect description of what happens with Laura's cure by a second taste of the fruit juices. Her second taste is, in a symbolic sense, properly medicated, mediated as it is by the loving self-sacrifice of her sister. *Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana* continues by saying that while all worldly activities are of a binding nature in that they attach people to the material world, "the same, when offered to the Lord, lose their binding character." Moreover, the text says that duties performed in the world "for the pleasure of the Lord" lead to "the attainment of wisdom combined with Devotion."

Lizzie exposes herself to temptation and overcomes it in Christ-like self-sacrifice for Laura; Laura purifies her selfish desire and hunger in her love and gratitude to Lizzie. The fruit juices that previously enslaved Laura, transformed by the divine love embodied in Lizzie, now liberate her.

Source: Claire Robinson, Critical Essay on "Goblin Market," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2008.

Helen Pilinovsky

In the following excerpt, Pilinovsky examines "Goblin Market" in light of Victorian culture, paying special attention to the role of the Victorian marketplace. Pilinovsky draws on the work of several other critics to make her points, concluding that the poem reinforces the Victorian practice of valuing society above the individual.

… Fundamentally, the market represents both economic and a social transgression—or, rather, the amalgamation of the two by a society that came to see money as being equivalent to honor and power. Social transgression came to be expressed through economic means. Thus, all of those instances of mortals buying goods unintended for their hands, as in Rossetti's "Goblin Market," or of stealing them, cheating others, and breaking contracts, to set only a few examples, become newly significant of their transgression against the norms of society, and doubly

significant because of their occurrence in the liminal state of the market—a place where the norms must be *more* strictly observed, rather than less, so as to maintain the borders between the permissible and the forbidden.

The impression that Rossetti creates in her presentation of the two girls are both similar and dissimilar. The two girls are comparable in many ways, as can be seen in the following description:

Golden head by golden head, / Like two pigeons in one nest / Folded in each other's wings, / They lay down in their curtain'd bed: / Like two blossoms on one stem, / Like two flakes of new-fall'n snow, / Like two wands of ivory / Tipp'd with gold for awful kings. / Moon and stars gaz'd in at them, / Wind sang to them lullaby, / Lumbering owls forbore to fly, / Not a bat flapp'd to and fro / Round their rest: / Cheek to cheek and breast to breast / Lock'd together in one nest.

The symbolism here implies the beauties of homogeneity, and the love and recognition of the familiar—this seems representative of Victorian society. However, the two are not identical; rather, they are like the id and the superego, with Lizzie being the more logical, and Laura the more impulsive. Lizzie is shown to be the more cautious of the two; potential danger does not engage her curiosity, but simply warns her off, as we can see in the lines where she reacts to her sister's curious reaction to the goblin men; we read, "'No,' said Lizzie, 'No, no, no; / Their offers should not charm us, / Their evil gifts would harm us." Lizzie heeds example of other girls' fates, and behaves carefully, in the prescribed manner; later, she will act as storyteller, as the experienced voice of reason. Laura, in marked contrast, is also aware of the dangers, but she is more rash; despite her knowledge of the likely consequences, we read how she disregards her sister's reiteration of the warning that she herself initially makes; she throws caution to the winds, and begins the process that will temporarily part the two when she ignores her own good sense and her sister's actions. We read,

Laura rear'd her glossy head, / And whisper'd like the restless brook: / "Look, Lizzie, look, Lizzie, / Down the glen tramp little men. / One hauls a basket, / One bears a plate, / One lugs a golden dish / Of many pounds weight. / How fair the vine must grow / Whose grapes are so luscious; / How warm the wind must blow / Through those fruit bushes."

The nature of Laura's transgression is very telling. Laura knows that to buy the fruits is forbidden to her. As Terrence Holt notes that "the ostensible function of [the] discourse of the marketplace is to stress the difference between maidens and goblins. Exchange, 'Goblin Market' claims, is the province of goblins, not little girls. The market is dangerous to maids, who belong safely at home," a fact of which both girls appear to be aware. Laura, in particular, is aware of their dangers and their unfamiliar source. She says so herself, when she first warns Lizzie: "We must not look at goblin men, /We must not buy their fruits: / Who knows upon what soil they fed / Their hungry thirsty roots?" Yet she herself, referred to as

"curious Laura," and "sweet-toothed Laura," is vulnerable; she commits her actions while being aware of their consequences, if not of their full extent. Nevertheless, Laura yields to temptation. She resists it at first; we read, "Laura stared but did not stir, / Long'd but had no money" She attempts to explain her situation, saying, "Good folk, I have no coin; / To take were to purloin: / I have no copper in my purse, / I have no silver either, / And all my gold is on the furze / That shakes in windy weather / Above the rusty heather," and then, finally, accepts the goblin bargain to trade a lock of her golden hair when they offer to barter. Rossetti writes, "'You have much gold upon your head,' / They answer'd all together: / 'Buy from us with a golden curl." According to the magical Law of Contagnation, which states that any part of a thing is equivalent to the entirety, Laura has given them herself; in exchange, she has taken their corruption into herself. It appears, as well, that she knows what she has done; after clipping off a lock of her hair, we read how she "dropped a tear more rare than pearl," signaling her knowledge of her doom.

The description of Laura sampling the fruit is very sensual. We read,

She dropp'd a tear more rare than pearl, / Then suck'd their fruit globes fair or red: / Sweeter than honey from the rock, / Stronger than man-rejoicing wine, / Clearer than water flow'd that juice; / She never tasted such before, /How should it cloy with length of use? / She suck'd and suck'd and suck'd the more / Fruits which that unknown orchard bore; / She suck'd until her lips were sore; / Then flung the emptied rinds away / But gather'd up one kernel stone, /And knew not was it night or day / As she turn'd home alone.

This brings us to the concrete nature of the market goods. The fruits of the poem have been thought to represent the desires of the flesh—the sensual nature of the poem is quite evident. This can also be seen in the references to the earlier goblin victim, Jeanie, who pines for the goblins as for lost lovers, described by Lizzie thus:

Do you not remember Jeanie, / How she met them in the moonlight, / Took their gifts both choice and many, / Ate their fruits and wore their flowers / Pluck'd from bowers / Where summer ripens at all hours? / But ever in the noonlight / She pined and pined away; / Sought them by night and day, / Found them no more, but dwindled and grew grey; / Then fell with the first snow, / While to this day no grass will grow / Where she lies low: / I planted daisies there a year ago / That never blow.

That implication is strengthened later on in the poem, when we read how Lizzie "thought of Jeanie in her grave, / Who should have been a bride; / But who for joys brides hope to have / Fell sick and died / In her gay prime." As Carole G. Silver sees it, the goblins "have … ravished and destroyed Jeanie …" her choice of verb is particularly interesting, and apt, in that it implies transports of delight, abduction, and violation, all of which Jeanie has suffered, in one way or another.

This reading foreshadows all that is to befall the two sisters, from Laura's initial pleasure in the fruit, to the way that it takes her away from Lizzie, and finally, to the abuses committed upon Laura in her attempt to save her sister. The fruits have been thought to represent narcotics as well as sensuality, as the Victorian period was rife with drug abuse, particularly that of opium, which is also known as the fruit of the poopy. Laura's inability to hear the goplin men thereafter seems similar to the tolerance that a drug user builds up; as can be seen in her reaction to the realization that the fruits will no longer affect her as they had is certainly reminiscent of withdrawal. We read,

Laura turn'd cold as stone / To find her sister heard that cry alone, / That goblin cry, / "Come buy our fruits, come buy." / Must she then buy no more such dainty fruit? / Must she no more such succous pasture find, / Gone deaf and blind? / Her tree of life droop'd from the root: / She said not one word in her heart's sore ache; / But peering thro' the dimness, nought discerning, / Trudg'd home, her pitcher dripping all the way; / So crept to bed, and lay / Silent till Lizzie slept; / Then sat up in a passionate yearning, / And gnash'd her teeth for baulk'd desire, and wept / As if her heart would break.

The use of fruit as a symbol of temptation has both Biblical and Classical roots, in the apple of Eden, and the pomegranate of Hades. Both are well represented in the goblin's wares, referred to, respectively, simply as "apples," and as "[p]omegranates full and fine." In "Goblin Market," as in both of the former cases, knowledge of the forbidden is equivalent to death.

The manner of Laura's rescue from the goblin's by Lizzie is particularly interesting. She goes to buy fruit for her sister, but offers no more than mortal coin; the goblins receive it, not of their own volition, but when she tosses it at them. Rossetti writes, "'Good folk,' said Lizzie, / Mindful of Jeanie: / 'Give me much and many':—/ Held out her apron, / Toss'd them her penny." This is not their preferred payment; they wish to gain her company, and herself, and they demur, attempting to put her off with half-truths. In the typical way of fairies, they avoid outright lies, as these would invalidate any resulting bargains. They say,

"Nay, take a seat with us, / Honour and eat with us," / They answer'd grinning: / "Our feast is but beginning. / Night yet is early, / Warm and dew-pearly, / Wakeful and starry: / Such fruits as these / No man can carry: / Half their bloom would fly, / Half their dew would dry, Half their flavour would pass by. / Sit down and feast with us, / Be welcome guest with us, / Cheer you and rest with us."

They speak the truth concerning the effects of consumption of their fruits absent of their presen[ce], but they avoid informing potential customers of the effects of their wares; truly, a case of "Buyer, Beware," as Lizzie does. She is interested in partaking of their custom only on her own terms, a fact which obviously displeases them. Nevertheless, they have accepted payment, which they do not return when she says "If you will not sell me any / Of your fruits though much and many / Give

me back my silver penny / I tossed you for a fee." The deal has been struck, and sealed with silver; by ancient rules of fairy, with which Rossetti appears aware, and which still operate in full force even in the confines of the market, they must attempt to fulfill their bargain; they "give" her the fruit by attacking her with it. We read,

They began to scratch their pates, / No longer wagging, purring, / But visibly demurring, / Grunting and snarling. / One call'd her proud, / Cross-grain'd, uncivil; / Their tones wax'd loud, / Their look were evil. / Lashing their tails / They trod and hustled her, / Elbow'd and jostled her, / Claw'd with their nails, / Barking, mewing, hissing, mocking, / Tore her gown and soil'd her stocking, / Twitch'd her hair out by the roots, / Stamp'd upon her tender feet, / Held her hands and squeez'd their fruits / Against her mouth to make her eat …

As Silver asserts, "What marks … Rossetti's goblin men as particularly threatening … is their grotesque materiality, their physical ludicrousness combined with their 'primitive' sexuality … Their elbowing, jostling, pinching, and clawing, amount to near rape, or at least sexual assault." They attempt to have their will of her physically, when they cannot coerce her through other means, to force the metaphorical properties of the fruit—carnality—when it will not be taken through manipulation. However, for Rossetti, free will is paramount, not only on the basis of religious principle, though those are invoked, as we shall soon see, but also on the principles of the market. Rossetti writes,

One may lead a horse to water, / Twenty cannot make him drink. / Though the goblins cuff'd and caught her, / Coax'd and fought her, / Bullied and besought her, / Scratch'd her, pinch'd her black as ink, / Kick'd and knock'd her, / Maul'd and mock'd her, / Lizzie utter'd not a word; / Would not open lip from lip / Lest they should cram a mouthful in: / But laugh'd in heart to feel the drip / Of juice that syrupp'd all her face, / And lodg'd in dimples of her chin, / And streak'd her neck which quaked like curd.

Regardless of what they resort to, Lizzie will not accept. They literally cannot force her to acquiesce under conditions that she had not agreed to, and finally, we read how

At last the evil people, / Worn out by her resistance, / Flung back her penny, kick'd their fruit / Along whichever road they took, / Not leaving root or stone or shoot; / Some writh'd into the ground, / Some div'd into the brook / With ring and ripple, / Some scudded on the gale without a sound, / Some vanish'd in the distance.

They return her penny, and storm off, unable to gain any advantage over her. They have attempted to fulfill the bargain on their terms, by forcing the goods that she had inquired about and paid for in advance upon her, which she will not allow; they refuse to fulfill the bargain on her terms, by simply giving her the fruit to carry off, knowing that they will not gain her "spirit" in that way, and perhaps that

they will lose the benefits of a former "customer." Thus, matters have concluded with a draw; except, by breaking the rules of the marketplace by using physical force, they have granted her what she wanted all along, the means to rescue her sister from their coils. Lizzie has triumphed, simply by knowing the rules of the marketplace.

Lizzie's actions are heroic, but they are put forth in a singularly passive manner; martyr like, Lizzie allows herself to be brutally attacked so that she may bring the fruits of her labor back home to heal her sister. She is described thus;

White and golden Lizzie stood, / Like a lily in a flood,—/ Like a rock of blue-vein'd stone / Lash'd by tides obstreperously,—/ Like a beacon left alone / In a hoary roaring sea, / Sending up a golden fire,—/ Like a fruit-crown'd orange-tree / White with blossoms honey-sweet / Sore beset by wasp and bee,— / Like a royal virgin town / Topp'd with gilded dome and spire / Close beleaguer'd by a fleet / Mad to tug her standard down.

Rossetti alludes to the Virgin Mary, clothing Lizzie in her colors, and using the adjective "virgin" to describe her. The original, destructive, nature of the fruit is transmogrified by Lizzie's sacrifices on behalf and love for her sister. Upon returning home, she offers herself and her sacrifice to her sister; we read how

She cried, "Laura," up the garden, / "Did you miss me? / Come and kiss me. / Never mind my bruises, / Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices / Squeez'd from goblin fruits for you, / Goblin pulp and goblin dew. / Eat me, drink me, love me; / Laura, make much of me; / For your sake I have braved the glen / And had to do with goblin merchant men.

Here, finally, we see Laura begin to break free of the goblin spell, more out of concern for her sister than through any magical properties. Breaking free of her artificial lethargy,

Laura started from her chair, / Flung her arms up in the air, / Clutch'd her hair: / "Lizzie, Lizzie, have you tasted / For my sake the fruit forbidden? / Must your light like mine be hidden, / Your young life like mine be wasted, / Undone in mine undoing, / And ruin'd in my ruin, / Thirsty, canker'd, goblin-ridden?

Laura begins to kiss her from concern, rather than selfishness, and continues when she feels the restorative power of the medicine that her sister has fetched for her. Rossetti writes,

She clung about her sister, / Kiss'd and kiss'd and kiss'd her: / Tears once again / Refresh'd her shrunken eyes, / Dropping like rain / After long sultry drouth; / Shaking with aguish fear, and pain, / She kiss'd and kiss'd her with a hungry mouth …

Rossetti implies that Laura is still operating under the influence of the fruit when she performs these actions, saying, "Ah! fool, to choose such part / Of soul-consuming care!" Her concern for her sister is overtaken by her need for succor, with little sense of the depth of the support behind it. When Laura sucks the juices of the fruit from her sister's flesh, she is nurtured, like a babe by her mother. One has the sense that it is her sacrifice and love that heals Laura, as much as any goblin fruit. However, when she wakes, healed, she realizes the full extent of Lizzie's concern. We read how, recovered, "Laura awoke as from a dream, / Laugh'd in the innocent old way, / Hugg'd Lizzie but not twice or thrice."

The last lines of the poem reiterate the Victorian value of society over individualism. Laura and Lizzie lead lives of virtue, mirroring one another as they had in the past, implying their reintegration into a homogenous, harmonious union. It is Laura who appends a moral to the tale of their experiences; she tells their collective brood that

... there is no friend like a sister / In calm or stormy weather; / To cheer one on the tedious way, / To fetch one if one goes astray, / To lift one if one totters down, / To strengthen whilst one stands.

Source: Helen Pilinovsky, "Conventionalism and Utopianism in the Commodification of Rossetti's 'Goblin Market,'" in *Extrapolation*, Vol. 45, No. 1, Spring 2004, pp. 52-64.

David B. Drake

In the following essay, Drake contends that "Goblin Market" displays numerous characteristics of an epyllion, a small epic poem. Among these qualities, notes Drake, are that the poem features "an epic heroine who engages in quintessentially epical exploits."

Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" exhibits several of the characteristics and conventions of epic poetry and should be studied as a somewhat modified version of the epyllion—a poem that emulates the classical epic in subject matter and technique, but is decidedly shorter (typically depicting just a single heroic episode) and narrower in scope—modified because the epyllion is ideally composed using dactylic hexameter, and "Goblin Market" is, of course, written in free verse.

A substantial number of critics have noted that Rossetti's heroine, Lizzie, resembles a transfigured Christ who redeems her peccant sister by sacrificing herself to the malevolent goblins. Feminist critics, meanwhile, have designated Lizzie a pioneering member of their own movement who is earnestly determined to protect the sanctity of sisterhood against any form of patriarchal corruption (i.e. the goblin men). Inherent in both these persuasive exegeses is the understanding that Lizzie is an individual of historic, or even cosmic, consequence. Moreover, one

need not examine her victorious encounter with the goblins (lines 363-446) too scrupulously to recognize that Lizzie's actions are not only valorous, but utterly herculean in magnitude (keep in mind that she is but a child and is greatly outnumbered). In short, Lizzie, while ostensibly not an imposing personage, is truly an epic heroine.

Thematically, "Goblin Market" incorporates a pair of archetypal motifs that frequently appear in epic poetry. To begin with, Lizzie's journey into the glen to combat the demonic, preternatural goblins—the poem's epic machinery—is analogous to a descent into the underworld. And accordingly, her subsequent reemergence from this underworld clearly signifies a resurrection, not so much for herself, but more precisely for the moribund Laura (again, Lizzie the Christlike healer), as well as for all maidens, since Lizzie (the seminal feminist) has emphatically demonstrated that they indeed possess more resourcefulness and tenaciousness than the goblins, and consequently need no longer be the victims of their misogynistic tyranny.

Besides featuring an epic heroine who engages in quintessentially epical exploits, Rossetti's poem also features some of the unifying stylistic devices commonly employed by epic poets, such as the refrain (exemplified here by the goblins' exhortation, "Come buy, come buy") and anaphoristic repetition. In fact, the anaphora in "Goblin Market" repeatedly involves the clustering of similes, with each cluster devoted to describing a lone primary object and thus functioning much like an aggregate epic simile. In other words, when making a comparison, Rossetti does not offer merely one secondary vehicle developed well beyond its patent correspondence with a primary object (as occurs in the epic simile), but rather a consecutive string of secondary vehicles, of similes. Granted, none of these secondary vehicles; is intricately developed; still the immediate effect is exactly the same as in the epic simile: the primary object is deemphasized. Perhaps this is best explained through illustration:

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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
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When its last restraint is gone.

(81-86)

These simile clusters appear throughout the poem, most notably to depict a somnolent embrace between Laura and Lizzie (184-91), a steadfast Lizzie as she prepares to face the goblins (408-21), and Laura's frenzied reaction after ingesting the vivifying fruit juice that her sister has so courageously procured for her (510-20).

"Goblin Market" additionally includes two epic catalogues, albeit these martial catalogues, like those found in Pope's mock-heroic "Rape of the Lock," are metaphoric. The first comes at the start of the poem (5-29), listing the goblins' poisonous produce, their armaments, while another, itemizing the goblins or warriors themselves, occurs approximately between lines 55 and 76.

In his essay "Simple Surfaces: Christina Rossetti's Work for Children," Roderick McGillis briefly mentions that Laura's miraculous reanimation near the close of "Goblin Market" recalls the passage in Homer's *Odyssey* when "Odysseus' sailors return to human form after Odysseus has overpowered Circe" (211). They, like Laura, actually seem to have been favorably transformed by virtue of surviving their mystical ordeal. Unfortunately, however, McGillis neglects to develop this evocative thesis further and comment explicitly upon the striking number of parallels between "Goblin Market" and epic poetry in general. Because Rossetti's poem manifests not simply one or two, but a number of epic attributes, it seems thoroughly unlikely that their presence is entirely coincidental. And seeing that a poem need not be written in dactylic hexameter to be considered an epyllion (e.g. Arnold's "Sohrab and Rustum"; Tennyson's "Idylls of the King"), it is only appropriate that "Goblin Market" be likewise regarded as an epyllion or small epic.

Source: David B. Drake, "Rossetti's ‘Goblin Market,’" in *Explicator*, Vol. 51, No. 1, Fall 1992, pp. 22-24.

Saturday Review

In the following review of Goblin Market and Other Poems *dated shortly after the publication of the volume, the critic praises the volume as a whole while lamenting that the title poem is not able to bear the weight of the imagery with which Rossetti infuses it. The critic remarks on the "pleasant flow of sound and stream of imagery" in the poem but contends that a "deeper meaning" remains hidden.*

Miss Rossetti's poetical power is most undeniable. She is gifted with a very good musical ear, great strength and clearness of language, and a vivid imagination, which only now and then wants to be restrained. Some of the shorter pieces in [*Goblin Market and Other Poems*] are as faultless in expression, as picturesque in

effect, and as high in purity of tone as any modern poem that can be named. It is a pleasure to meet an authoress who has obviously given such conscientious labour to the tasks she has set herself to accomplish, and who has succeeded so frequently in saying the right thing to be said in the best and shortest way.

Yet there is one ground upon which we are inclined to quarrel with Miss Rossetti; and that ground is the poem which is placed in the front of her volume and of its title. "*Goblin Market*" is a story of too flimsy and unsubstantial a character to justify or to bear the elaborate detail with which it is worked out. As it deduces a moral at the close in favour of sisterly affection, it may be presumed to be in some sense or other an allegory. But what the allegory is, or how far it runs upon all-fours with that of which it is the shadow, we cannot undertake to say … Where the moral inculcated is so excellent and proper, it may seem ungracious to complain of the unreal texture of the fable through which it is conveyed. The language of the story is very graceful and musical, and the picture of the sisters in their daily labour and rest is drawn with a pretty simplicity which gives a momentary substantiality to the dreamland in which they live …

An artist of Miss Rossetti's power ought to know by instinct a theme which will bear filling out with shape and colour, from one of which the inconsecutiveness and unreality show only the more strongly in proportion to the labour used in its embodiment and ornament. A picture of which half is a photographically accurate representation of nature, and the other half a purely symbolical imagination worked out with equal distinctness and detail, can never be really harmonious or satisfactory; and the same may be said of a story. The eye and the ear equally like to know to what extent they are bound to believe what they see and hear, and what is the result of it all. The reader of "*Goblin Market*" may be carried on by the pleasant flow of sound and stream of imagery; but the real thought of the poem is a mere rope of sand, carrying no deeper consistency or meaning than the revelations from the unseen world interpreted now-a-days by a professional spirit-medium.

Miss Rossetti's genius appears to tend very naturally towards symbolical expression. One of the most perfect little pieces in the volume is the statement of a very serious enigma called "*Uphill*". It is remarkable for saying not more than is needed on a text which tempts many sermonizers to be prolix …

There is a subdued and grave simplicity about … [the poem] which very clearly marks Miss Rossetti's power of accommodating her style to the subject. Equal simplicity, combined with a more detailed picturesqueness and a more plaintive tone, is to be found in "*An Apple-Gathering*" …

[In this poem, the] idea of the composition is rather pictorial than poetical; and it is so graceful when regarded in this light that we can afford to overlook the slight artifices of the verbal interpretation which Miss Rossetti has given to her own painter's imaginings. The foundation of the whole picture is a genuine and human sentiment, quite different from the sheer unreality which underlies the conception

of the "*Goblin Market*"; and for the strength and success with which this sentiment has been caught and impressed upon the sense of the reader, it is prudent to forgive some of the questionable truth of detail.

The devotional poems which fill a large portion of this volume are excellent in tone, and generally very clear and good in expression. Every reader of one of these called "From House to Home," will be forcibly reminded of the manner of Mr. Tennyson's "Palace of Art and Dream of Fair Women;" but the poem is not wanting in originality of thought. The highest specimens of Miss Rossetti's power, however, will be found in the secular division of her works …

It would be easy to point out various instances of a slight affectation in language and in rhythm, and an unnecessary preference for the use of unfamiliar in lieu of familiar terms. Such faults are, perhaps, theoretically, less excusable in an authoress who shows her thorough command of metre, and of a very sufficient vocabulary of good sterling English. Yet in such a case these errors are practically the more venial, as they may be expected to correct themselves in the course of study. Miss Rossetti displays the talent of conscientious hard work in her verses, as Mr. [Dante Gabriel] Rossetti does in his very remarkable and original paintings. Sooner or later they will both, as we trust, work out for themselves in their respective arts the desirable conviction that quaintness is not strength, and that it generally interferes with beauty.

Source: Saturday Review, Review of "Goblin Market," in *Saturday Review*, Vol. 13, No. 343, May 24, 1862, pp. 595-96.