

## Intertwining themes in "Goblin Market"

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In "Goblin Market" (1862) Christina Rossetti tells the story of two innocent sisters and their interactions with insidious goblins. The sisters' extremely close relationship enables them to defeat the mysteriously evil workings of the goblins. Rossetti describes the goblins as half-man and half-animal creatures with characteristics and features of felines, rodents and birds. The goblins creep around the brook near the sisters' house chanting repeatedly for them to "Come buy our orchard fruits, / Come buy, come buy" (line 3-4). One of the sisters, Lizzie, informs the other sister, Laura, not to even look at the evil creatures. Despite Lizzie's warnings, the goblins successfully lure Laura into giving them a lock of her golden hair in exchange for a feast of luscious fruit. Upon eating the fruit, Laura experienced an intense moment (perhaps of ecstasy) that left her in a state where she "knew not was it night or day" (line 139). Laura returns to her sister who again warns her of the goblins' harm, but this warning comes too late. The yearning for more of the tainted fruit fully occupies Laura's mind. The two sisters go to sleep together with "cheek to cheek and breast to breast / Locked together in one nest"(line 197-198). Although they sleep as physically close as possible, their minds reside in very different places.

The next day, Laura is shocked to find no goblins and no succulent fruit in the glen. Surprisingly, only Lizzie can hear the insistent cries of the goblins. Laura falls into depression and sickness when she realizes that she may not experience the fruits again. Lizzie anxiously watches her sister's health deteriorate until she can no longer stand it. At this point, she takes a coin and heads to the glen to buy fruit for her sister in hopes of reviving Laura's well being. In a moving passage, Rossetti brutally illustrates the rude and invasive behavior of the goblins as they try to force Lizzie to eat the fruit. Lizzie holds strong, knowing to absolutely resist the fruit, but she lets the juices of the fruit stick to her body to bring home to her sister. Upon returning, Lizzie invites Laura to "hug me, kiss me, suck my juices" (line 468). Lizzie feasts upon her sister's skin, taking in all the nectars. The juices sparked a moment of both bliss and suffering.

Her lips began to scorch,  
That juice was wormwood to her tongue,  
She loathed the feast:  
Writhing as one possessed she leaped and sung,  
Rent all her robe, and wrung  
Her hands in lamentable haste,  
And beat her breast.  
Her locks streamed like the torch  
Borne by a racer at full speed,  
Or like the mane of horses in their flight,  
Or like an eagle when she stems the light  
Straight toward the sun,  
Or like a caged thing freed,  
Or like a flying flag when armies run.

Swift fire spread through her veins, knocked at her heart,  
Met the fire smouldering there  
And overbore its lesser flame,  
She gorged on bitterness without a name:  
Ah! fool, to choose such part  
Of soul-consuming care!  
Sense failed in the mortal strife:  
Like the watch-tower of a town  
Which an earthquake shatters down,  
Like a lightning-stricken mast,

Like a wind-uprooted tree  
 Spun about,  
 Like a foam-topped water-spout  
 Cast down headlong in the sea,  
 She fell at last;  
 Pleasure past and anguish past,  
 Is it death or is it life ?

Lizzie sleeps off this dramatic moment and by the morning, she has completely recovered to her original self. The two sisters live to be married and each tell their children the story of their sisterly love and sacrifice prevailing over beasts of evil.

## Question

Rossetti's word choice in "Goblin's Market" consistently gives rise to many sexual connotations. She describes sensual parts of the body such as lips, breasts and cheeks. She also utilizes verbs such as to hug, kiss, squeeze and suck. Sexual connotations heighten the relationship between the male goblins and female maidens. Laura's ecstatic experience with the goblin's fruit is an indescribable high that is almost orgasmic. The goblins' over-invasive and aggressive advances towards Lizzie could represent sexual invasion such as rape. In addition to these sexual relations, there is an erotic undertone to the close relationship of the two sisters. Rossetti describes their sleeping positions to be so intimate and connected. In addition, the climatic description of the physical interaction as Laura shares the goblins' juices with Lizzie could have erotic implications. These sexual implications would have been apparent to the poem's Victorian English audience. As a female poet, Rossetti makes a bold statement about female sexuality in her time, perhaps addressing issues that would have been considered hush-hush and taboo. Do these implications change or twist the wholesome "sisterly love" theme of the poem? Can the erotic interpretation and the chaste and virginal interpretation be reconciled?

Rossetti fills "Goblin's Market" with subject matter and themes that has strong religious associations. There is an important theme of temptation similar to Eve's temptation in the Old Testament. Laura is slyly enticed to eat forbidden fruit, which predictably results in great pain and her lose of innocence. Her redemption comes with Lizzie's sacrifice of and offering up of her body. Her suffering parallels Christ's martyrdom for the sins of mankind. Religious symbolism and female sexuality are both familiar PRB themes, however, Rossetti entangles these two contrasting themes in "Goblin's Market". The intertwining of the two themes are exemplified when Lizzie says to Laura, "Eat me, drink me, love me; Laura, make much of me" (line 471-472) Can these double connotations be balanced? Are there other examples of works of poetry or art that dare to combine religious symbolism and erotica?

Christina Rossetti's brother, Dante Gabriel Rossetti made two illustrations for the 1865 London 2nd edition of *Goblin's Market and Other Poems*. Dante Rossetti chooses to illustrate the cover of the book with the visual depiction of the seventh stanza of the poem in which the [two sisters intimately embrace](#) in their sleep. For the second illustration, D. G. Rossetti chooses to portray line 126, the pinnacle moment when [Laura cuts a lock of her hair](#) for the goblins' fruit. Presently D. G. Rossetti obsesses over female subjects that are beautiful yet beset with lost or restrained love. There are moments in which the sisters are greatly restrained. One is even reminded of a D.G. Rossetti's Fair Lady portraits, such as *Regina Cordium* in stanza three.

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.

In addition, Lizzie attempts to restrain herself from going to the goblins when her sister falls sick. Why would D. G. Rossetti not select a moment of obstacle or restrained love for his illustrations? Rossetti's illustrations emphasize what major themes? In comparing the written words with the pictures, do D. G. Rossetti's illustrations possess the same narrative and thematic power of Christina Rossetti's words?

## **Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market": Feminist Poem or Religious Allegory?**

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In Christina Rossetti's long narrative poem, "Goblin Market," two sisters are tempted by evil goblin merchants who haunt the woods and allure maidens with sumptuous fruits, the traditional symbol of temptation in the Bible. Christina Rossetti clearly intended the fruit of the goblin merchants to symbolize the forbidden fruit in the biblical story when Laura asks Lizzie if she has tasted "for my sake the fruit forbidden." Christina Rossetti's use of meaningful religious symbolism contrasts with [Dante Gabriel's](#) tendency to take up traditionally religious symbols but leave them vague and empty of meaning.

"Goblin Market," one of Christina's most sexual poems, contains numerous analogies to sexual appetites, but it is unclear whether she was aware of these sexual innuendos. As her desire for sensuous fulfillment becomes more intense, Laura takes on the characteristics of a beast, recalling the fate of many lustful figures in Dante's *Inferno*:

(Laura) Then sat up in a passionate yearning,  
And gnashed her teeth for balked desire, and wept  
As if her heart would break.

The character of Laura closely parallels the figure of the She-Wolf which represents excessive desire: "her nature is so squalid, so malicious / that she can never sate her greedy will; / When she has fed, she's hungrier than ever" (*Inferno*, I, 97-99). When humans are dominated by their emotions and sensations, they are reduced to the animal level and lose their capacity for freedom. Such errant desire unchecked by reason or the will of God resulted in the fall of man (*Paradiso*, XXIV, 103).

Whereas Laura succumbs to the Goblin's seduction, her sister Lizzie remains firmly resistant. Fearing for her sister who has started to physically waste away, Lizzie heroically braves the temptations of the goblins and exposes herself to their abuse in order to save her sister's life:

Though the goblins cuffed and caught her,  
Coaxed and fought her,  
Bullied and besought her,  
Scratched her, pinched her black as ink,  
Kicked and knocked her,  
Mauled and mocked her,  
Lizzie uttered not a word;  
Would not open lip from lip  
Lest they should cram a mouthful in.

In this scene, the goblins violently taunt and torment Lizzie, but she never wavers in her resistance. Rossetti paints a picture of female resistance that is passive and silent unlike "Song" in which the woman actually "talks back." Lizzie can be viewed as a self-sacrificing martyr figure who suffers in order to save her sister's life. Although the poem ends on a feminist note, calling for female bonds and sisterhood, Lizzie

cannot be simply characterized as a strong female heroine, because she passively endures the goblin brothers' transgressions of her body.

## Theme in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market"

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It is difficult to cull a satisfying thematic interpretation from Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market." Obvious themes might be "that one should be careful of temptation," or "that little girls should not talk to strange men." One might even go on to the end of the poem and decide the theme is "that sisters should love one another." These are rather trite ideas, however, and while the poem definitely supports them (and they are easily defended with quotations from the text), a more careful look at "Goblin Market" reveals that the poem is fairly complex, and able to support a more revolutionary reading than the ones put forth above. Rather than saying that "Goblin Market" has a particular theme, I would put forth the notion that it attempts to deal with certain problems Rossetti recognized within the [canon](#) of English literature, and specifically with the problem of how to construct a female hero.

There are no significant female heroes in English literature up to the time of Rossetti. Female protagonists exist, of course, like Elizabeth in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, but they have no outlet for heroic action. They are constrained by the gender-roles into which a male-dominated society has placed them. Elizabeth must spend a good deal of her energy waiting for Darcy to take action; she herself is hobbled by the cords of decorum.

In "Goblin Market," Rossetti creates a rudimentary framework of behavior in which a female hero — a heroine — might operate. Rossetti's efforts are to some degree successful, though she fails to solve the problem completely.

Throughout the poem Lizzie remains pure; this is nothing new. The role of the unstained virgin has existed longer than the English language. Spenser's Florimell provides an early example. What is different about Lizzie is that she actively pursues temptation with the intention of conquering it. When she sees that Laura is wasting away (Norton 1514), Lizzie resolves to go and get her the fruit as a final, desperate effort to save her sister's life. When the Goblins refuse to sell her the fruit (Norton 1516) and attack Lizzie, she forbears temptation and keeps her mouth closed:

Lizzie                      uttered                      not                      a                      word;  
Would                      not                      open                      lip                      from                      lip  
Lest they should cram a mouthful in. (Norton 1517)

Eventually, she manages to save her sister by running home and asking Laura to "Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices / Squeezed from goblin fruits for you," explaining that "For your sake I have braved the glen / And had to do with goblin merchant men" (Norton 1518). Laura's cure, implemented by her sucking the juices from Lizzie's face, is somewhat baffling; the reader is left confused as to what actually cured her, the residual juices or her sister's love.

So what we are left with is this: a woman performed a heroic, self-sacrificing action (certainly related to Christ's sacrifice of himself) to save her sister. Good. However, it seems apparent that there are problems with the framework for feminine heroism constructed by Rossetti. It remains a passive kind of heroism. Lizzie does not attack the goblin men, demanding the antidote for their fruit, or weave a spell of benign magic over her sister. She is forced to offer herself up to goblin abuse (physical, sexual goblin abuse) to perform a positive action. It is possible to account for the passive nature of Lizzie's act by putting it into the context of Rossetti's Christian beliefs (Norton 1501), but that does not seem enough. The ambiguities at the end of "Goblin Market" and the almost out of place, strangely irrelevant feel of the last few lines (caused by their sanitized, formulaic tone at the end of a poem so rich in erotic and violent detail) indicate that Rossetti herself had not reached a satisfactory conclusion on the subject of female heroism.

## Fallen or Forbidden: Rossetti's "Goblin Market"

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In "Goblin Market" (1859), Christina Rossetti alludes to the traditional discourse of forbidden fruit and the biblical account of the Fall. She does so both to challenge the decidedly patriarchal perception of women within Victorian culture in terms of sexuality, education and the marketplace and also to reconstruct the Christian idea of redemption. This essay focuses primarily on the question of how female desire should be perceived, the answer depending on who or what forbids the consumption of the fruit: whether it is an immutable Divine Being, or merely the patriarchal society in which Rossetti lived. The ambiguity of the poem shows that Rossetti recognised that this issue was not easy to resolve within the cultural and ideological limitations of her society.

Female sexuality and education were constantly, although paradoxically, linked in Rossetti's time, so it seems reasonable to assume that in "Goblin Market" she considers both issues. The forbidden fruit undoubtedly refers to female sexuality, as many critics have stated, yet it can also relate to female education and knowledge. After all, it was from the Tree of *Knowledge* of Good and Evil that Eve ate. The issue for Rossetti is not wholly sexual or intellectual; rather the poem addresses all forms of female desire. This idea is reflected in Barbara Garlick's statement that within the Pre-Raphaelite movement "forbidden pleasures [were] clearly associated both with wild nature...and the secret delight of books" (109). Furthermore, Diane D'Amico points out that Eve ate the forbidden fruit in order to be like God, which is "prideful, not lustful" ("Eve, Mary and Mary Magdalene" 179), and also that in none of Rossetti's work is Eve represented as "an evil seductress" (178). On the whole, Rossetti steers away from equating female sexuality with sinfulness, which in itself is a radical move: sexual pleasure was forbidden to Victorian women, for as the passionless angels in the house, they were seen as "too pure and sacred to share in the disgusting lusts that afflicted men" (Karen Armstrong 6). At the same time, they were not to be given the same education as men because it was believed that too much intellectual activity would cause their reproductive organs to malfunction, securing the double bondage of sexuality and the intellect on women.

It is interesting to note that it is Laura — perhaps named after Petrarch's courtly ideal (Bentley 72) — who becomes the fallen woman, partaking of the forbidden fruit. Karen Armstrong addresses the "angel" myth of woman being "an island of perfection in a dark world" by looking at the way Petrarch's Laura was affiliated with the Virgin Mary, contrasted with the negative connotations associated with Eve (81). Armstrong speaks of the subversive power of virginity, that defies the idea that a woman needs a man to be whole: "the virginity myth developed the image of the 'whole' female body, whose hymen remains unbroken and possessed the innocent 'integrity' or wholeness that Eve enjoyed before the Fall" (81). Marina Warner also speaks of the Catholic belief in Mary's eternal virginity: "Mary was *virgo intacta post partum* . . . by special privilege of God she, who was spared sex, was preserved also through childbirth in her full bodily integrity" (22). Yet, as Armstrong points out, the virginal ideal also deprives women of their sexuality, an "important and essential part of their nature" (81). I feel that Rossetti attempts to reconcile these two concepts in "Goblin Market." When Laura eats the fruit, her appetite is insatiable: "I ate my fill,/Yet my mouth waters still" (165-66). Her craving for the fruit becomes like that of an addict, her inability to be satisfied causing her to be completely debilitated. She becomes "listless" (297), and unable to work because her hope of again eating the fruit is destroyed.

Significantly, Rossetti blurs the distinction between the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge and that from the Tree of Life. In the Genesis account of the Fall, after Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, as part of their punishment they are not allowed access to the Tree of Life (Gen. 3:22). However, in Rossetti's poem, the fruit that Laura can no longer access is the same fruit that was originally forbidden to her. Furthermore, Laura's "salvation" is actually found in tasting again the juices of the forbidden fruits, although instead of giving her an insatiable appetite as they did the first time, they perform the role of a "fiery antidote" (599), seemingly giving her enough to inoculate her, but not enough to feed her addiction. Essentially, therefore, Laura's fruit of knowledge and her fruit of life are derived from the same source, obscuring the definition between purity and sin. This image is very different from the biblical view, for Christ said that "A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit" (Matt. 7:18), clearly enforcing a difference between the two "fruits."

With this resolution, it does not seem possible that Rossetti sets up a straightforward dichotomy of abstention as good and consumption as sinful. It is more a picture of the hope deferred, to which she often refers in her poetry (Blake 2), as becoming a hope lost — women are allowed a portion of knowledge, whether it relates to their sexuality or intelligence, but with that revelation they must realise that regardless of their innate gifts or abilities, society will not allow them to reach their potential. As Brad Sullivan points out, Rossetti's "'hope' for meaning and clarity and completeness must be 'deferred' until she can escape from the self-destructive cycles of worldly existence" (1). Thus it is possible that Laura's need for "salvation" is not a result of sinfulness, but of dissatisfaction with her society.

The link between spiritual redemption and social reformation was clearly evident at the St Mary Magdalene house of charity in Highgate, a refuge for fallen women, where Rossetti was a volunteer worker from 1859 to 1870 (Marsh 238). True success in the mission of the home was found in the fulfilment of a twofold purpose: to reform penitent women into "reliable domestic servants" and to make them into active members of the [Church of England](#) (240). Marsh goes on to point out the similarities between "Goblin Market" and a story told by the Warden of Highgate, recorded in "A House of Mercy," an article published in the *English Woman's Journal* in 1857. The Warden's story is about several young women who, like Laura, take forbidden apples from an orchard, which leads them all to violence and death (242). A striking difference between the Warden's account and Rossetti's poem is that while the Warden's fallen women all become racked with guilt, Laura experiences neither guilt nor shame. The source of her emotional turmoil is not regret for her actions but an intensified desire to eat the fruit again. Thus the poem cannot be seen as merely a message of redemption, for that would entail Laura's feeling that she was morally wrong in acquiring the fruit in the first place. Her cure is necessary, not for her spiritual reconciliation, but for her reintegration into her society.

Further evidence for this idea can be found in the bond between Laura and Lizzie. If Lizzie is a redemptive Christ-figure, it would be necessary for there to be a relational separation between them after Laura eats the fruit, in order to symbolise the separation between God and humankind at the Fall, and this would need to be combined with a sense of shame on Laura's part. Instead, Laura openly tells Lizzie of the bliss she experienced in eating her fill of the "sugar-sweet . . . sap" of the fruit (183), without compromising their relationship at all. Rather than her confession being followed by a symbolic eviction from the Garden of Eden, in the next stanza Rossetti writes of the closeness, almost co-mingling of the sisters:

Golden head by golden head,  
 Like two pigeons in one nest  
 Folded in each other's wings,  
 They lay down in their curtained bed:  
 Like two blossoms on one stem,  
 Like two flakes of new-fall'n snow,  
 Like two wands of ivory tipped  
 With gold for awful kings.  
 Moon and stars gazed in at them,  
 Wind sang to them lullaby,  
 Lumbering owls forbore to fly,  
 Not a bat flapped to and fro  
 Round their nest:  
 Cheek to cheek and breast to breast  
 Locked together in one nest. [184-98]

This image is clearly not of purity foiling sinfulness, as would be expected in a traditional rhetoric of redemption, but more along the lines of what D'Amico sees in Rossetti's religious works: "Mary, the mother of God, and Mary Magdalene, the sinner, stood together at the Crucifixion. Therefore the disobedience that had cost Eve Eden need not cost her heaven" ("Eve, Mary and Mary Magdalene" 175). This idea suggests a spiritual and moral equality between what is holy and what is redeemed. Yet I see Rossetti's image as even more radical, since even before a price has been paid for Laura's redemption, there is no relational discord between what can be seen as arguably divine nature and human nature: the

two sisters remain equal in spite of Laura's apparently immoral act. Therefore, although Lizzie does play the role of a Christ-figure, it is not for Laura's *spiritual* redemption, as it is quite evident that her spiritual position — identified through her relationship with her sister — is never lost.

It appears, then, that Rossetti is not necessarily condemning the consumption of the fruit as sinful, but rather she questions whether to do so would be profitable. This interpretation ties in with St Paul's letter to the Corinthians: "all things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any" (I Cor. 6:12). It is quite possible that Rossetti considered this verse in her attitudes toward fallen women, as well as her general perspective on life: she looked for the eternal rewards of heaven, rather than the temporal rewards of earthly life. The goblins play a deceptive role, enticing Laura into a corruptible sense of fulfilment — corruptible because it cannot last; she can only buy the fruit once, but she does not realise this until after she has eaten it, and she thus falls under its power. The goblins cry of "come buy, come buy" throughout the poem seems to reflect the biblical trope of referring to the acquisition of heavenly rewards in terms of purchasing:

Ho, everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not? [Isa. 55:1-2]

The Book of Revelations echoes this idea: "I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fires, that thou mayest be rich" (Rev. 3:18). Within this discourse of buying and selling, it is easy to see the produce of the goblins as the corruptible, temporal rewards of earthly life that should be passed over, not because they are necessarily bad, but because there is something better to seek, something that will satisfy where the goblin fruit cannot: the eternal, incorruptible rewards of heaven. This idea relates to Christ's words: "provide yourselves bags which wax not old, a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, where no thief approacheth, neither moth corrupteth" (Luke 12:33).

Rossetti's attitude toward unconventionality and social outcasts is significant, for she seems to encourage an ideology of acceptance rather than judgment. As D'Amico says regarding Rossetti's involvement at Highgate, "we can assume that since Rossetti was involved in a cause that sought to reform these women, even return them to the family structure, she must have believed a fallen woman need not forever be a social outcast" ("Equal Before God" 69). This attitude is a decided move away from the unforgiving dominant one in her society, as seen in "A House of Mercy," which emphasises the evils of sexual promiscuity. In "Goblin Market" Rossetti argues that "fallen women are not only streetwalkers and sinners but also loving sisters" (Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets* 137). She promotes social acceptance, for Laura is able to live a "normal" life in the end, becoming a respectable wife and mother, whereas in Rossetti's society, a woman once "fallen" could not regain respectability. Rossetti seems to be saying that if a perfect God can accept these women, society, which is itself imperfect and corruptible, should also accept them. This idea directly relates to her attack against inequality in *The Face of the Deep*: "saints are ready to receive all sinners: all sinners are not ready to receive saints" (185).

Although the spiritual state of the fallen woman is important to Rossetti, it does seem as though she concerned herself equally, if not more so, with the way society deals with such women. Instead of ostracism, society is encouraged to sacrificially embrace them as Lizzie embraces Laura. The message of the poem therefore becomes just as much for the "Lizzies" in Rossetti's society as the "Lauras." As Marsh says, the poem was simple enough for the uneducated girls at Highgate but also appropriate for the "more sophisticated listeners schooled in religious exegesis...such as the staff at Highgate" (243). The redemption portrayed in "Goblin Market," then, is not so much spiritual as social.

In challenging the interpretation of "Goblin Market" as representative of fallen women acquiring a Christian salvation, I do not mean to remove the distinct spiritual implications of the text. The poem continually alludes to Revelation 10:10 — "And I took the little book out of the angel's hand and ate it up; and it was in my mouth sweet as honey: and as soon as I had eaten it, my belly was bitter." There are references to Laura being a "sweet-tooth" (GM 115), and to the fruit being "Sweet to the tongue" (30) and "Sweeter than honey" (129). Yet when Laura tastes the juices the second time, they are no longer sweet: the fruit is "like honey to the throat/But poison in the blood" (554-55). She clearly argues that although the

fruits of pleasure — whether they are sexual, intellectual, or otherwise — may seem sweet, they can, in fact, be destructive. However, this does not necessarily define the fruit as an issue of sinfulness but of social morality. Consequently its lack of acceptability is defined by culture, not by a Divine Being. The imperfect society of Victorian England forbid such items to women, and therefore the consumption of these fruits brings destruction within that particular society.

Although Rossetti in working at Highgate would not have questioned the immorality of prostitution, she might have empathised with the continued ostracism of these women that occurred even after they had been "reformed," especially in relation to the double standards in nineteenth-century society regarding female sexuality and marriage. D'Amico suggests that Rossetti did not see

much difference between the woman who sells herself in marriage, who does not marry for a genuine love, and the woman who has sexual experience before marriage because she is fooled by the promises of human love. Both are guilty of placing the things of earth before God. ["Equal Before God" 77]

Furthermore, as stated earlier, Rossetti also refers at times to knowledge and education by the rhetoric of forbidden fruit; thus it seems reasonable to conflate the issues of sexuality and education within "Goblin Market," understanding the poem to be less specifically related to fallen women, and more generally related to the Woman Question. It is significant that lack of education ties in succinctly with the perception of sexual promiscuity in women during the Victorian Age, as paradoxical as that idea seems in light of the fears of over-education causing reproductive dysfunction. The education these women were required to have, however, was not the academic education available to men, but moral education: "the girls at Highgate...were perceived to have the moral immaturity of children, unable to curb their appetite or temper" (Marsh 243). In "Goblin Market," Laura and Lizzie have both been morally educated to not even "peep at goblin men" (49), let alone to enter into an economy of exchange with them. Yet Laura is "curious" (69), seeking experience and knowledge beyond the limits imposed upon her.

The problem with the fruit in "Goblin Market" is expressed by Laura herself: "Who knows upon what soil they fed/Their hungry thirsty roots?" (44-45). In looking at the fruit as knowledge, this could refer to dangerous, unorthodox philosophies, which Rossetti evidently feared: "it is wiser to remain ignorant than to learn evil. . . . It is better to avoid doubts than to reject them" (*FD* 38). This rejection of intellectual discovery also relates to women not being able to exceed the boundaries of the private sphere. Laura seeks to trespass this boundary willingly, and Lizzie does so reluctantly, yet regardless of motivation, they both go beyond society's imposed limitations.

Lizzie might not actually taste the fruit, but she does take its juices upon herself, deriving pleasure both from her "sacrifice" and from her ability to withstand the goblin men, rather than from the fruit itself. Lizzie succeeds in her purpose — to "save" her sister — but she remains unsullied. Her achievement is long-lasting, while to taste the fruit is a transient experience. At the same time, it is still Lizzie, not Laura, who is perceived to be unfeminine. Laura fits into a feminized category as a fallen woman, but Lizzie refuses to conform: she is not an angel, for she seeks to buy the fruit, but neither is she prostituted, for she refuses to taste it. Her refusal to consume the fruit causes the goblins to attribute unfeminine qualities to her: "One called her proud,/Cross-grained, uncivil" (394-95); yet her purity remains evident: "White and golden Lizzie stood,/Like a lily in a flood" (408-409).

Lizzie's subversiveness in seeking out the goblins is justified both through her reluctance and her sense of self-sacrifice. She is compelled to act in order to promote freedom for women within her society by confronting the goblins — and consequently the patriarchal system of ostracism. The resolution of the poem reflects Rossetti's apparent ambivalence in regard to womanhood. The "willed confusion of fallen and unfallen" (Leighton, "Laws" 235) in "Goblin Market" shows that Rossetti was evidently torn between realising how blatantly her society seemed to disregard the biblical precedence for forgiveness and acceptance and actually being able to function effectively as an individual within that society. As D'Amico suggests, Lizzie is not the "pure unfallen sister" who saves the fallen woman ("Equal Before God" 70); neither does she function as the pure "opposite" of her sister — "the virginal woman is not set before the reader as an ideal" (76). Laura and Lizzie both eventually appear to conform to their expected roles as wives and mothers, yet in telling their children of the goblins, the moral of the story is not a warning



against approaching strange men or sampling forbidden fruits, but a valorisation of female solidarity. The absence of any patriarchal figure or influence is conspicuous in the final image, giving the impression of a cloistered existence. The women become pure, but not virginal; and most significantly, they do not express any regret for their rebellious past.

Even more importantly, during Laura's feverish deliverance from the seductions of the fruit, the question is put: "Pleasure past and anguish past,/Is it death or is it life?" (GM 522-23) Laura's reaction to the antidote is as full of passion as her previous insatiable appetite for the fruit, but once the antidote has worked, she falls into a comatose state, from which Lizzie is uncertain that she will recover. Laura's pulse is "flagging" (526), and Lizzie watches through the night, feeling for her sister's breath (527). Although Laura awakes "as from a dream" and "laugh[s] in the innocent old way" (537-38), she is a much more subdued, shadowy figure than she was at the beginning of the poem. Isobel Armstrong refers to Laura's recovery as a "second innocence" (54), which is a revealing idea, for Laura does not recover her initial innocence, which emphasised absolute freedom:

Laura	stretched	her	gleaming	neck
Like	a	rush-imbedded	swan,	
Like	a	lily	from	the
Like	a	moonlit	poplar	branch,
Like	a	vessel	at	the
				launch

When its last restraint is gone. [GM 81-86]

The portrayal of her "second" innocence is remarkably different, in that it is restricted to her outward appearance, giving no sense of the freedom and life she expressed before. She is redeemed because she seems outwardly to fall into line with what society expects of her: she appears passionless, and seeks no pleasure for herself. Yet beneath the apparently innocent sweetness, there lies a tantalising tone in Rossetti's language: "Her gleaming locks showed not one thread of grey,/Her breath was sweet as May/And light danced in her eyes" (540-42). Laura's innate passion cannot be denied, still reflected in the light dancing in her eyes, but it is carefully contained. It could be argued that while Laura awakes physically from her fever-induced coma, she does not fully recover spiritually or emotionally, as that very essence of her being — her overt passion — is not seen again. She is permitted the "fruit of her womb" — that is, her children — but not the fruit of her mind or her sexuality.

The implications of eating forbidden fruit are ambiguous in "Goblin Market," just as Rossetti's view is ambiguous concerning the role and status of women in her society. She addresses the restrictions placed on women, using biblical examples to reveal that these restrictions are incongruous with the will of God. In "Goblin Market" in particular, she pulls down the ideological boundaries of femininity, allowing women to escape from the extremes of classification: an angelic Virgin Mary, devoid of sexuality, or an Eve, punished for seeking knowledge. Rossetti puts her unswerving hope in Christ and heaven for the restoration of her society; a hope perhaps exemplified by the unconditional love Lizzie shows in both "saving" and accepting her sister.

## SENSUALITY IN “GOBLIN MARKET” CHALLENGES VICTORIAN IDEALS

While read as a children's story throughout the nineteenth century, it seems impossible to read Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" and not stop and ask yourself what is actually happening between sisters, Laura and Lizzie, and these oddly charming, yet dangerous goblin men. This poem is full of magical realism – Laura and Lizzie are living among goblin men who sell fruit "like honey to the throat but poison in the blood," yet intentionally, or unintentionally, Rossetti continuously refers to women's sensuality, using sexualized language and imagery that bring about very realistic questions of desire, temptation, sacrifice, redemption, and even, some critiques say, lesbianism (Rossetti 1662)? A window to alternate interpretations, this poem challenges patriarchal, societal norms for women during the Victorian era. With the help of this recurring theme of

sensuality, “Goblin Market” acknowledges the danger of desire for a Victorian woman, the fall from purity, and, in this case, progressively, the redemption and rise of woman with the help of woman.

Throughout the poem, there are recurring references to “lips, cheeks, and breasts,” as well as verbs “to hug, kiss, squeeze, and suck” (Flygare). Many of these highly sexualized references occur when Laura is eating fruit as well as between the sisters, emphasizing women’s sensuality.

The poem begins with the goblins crying, “Come buy our orchard fruits, Come buy, come buy” (Rossetti 1650). Though the reader doesn’t really understand why, the way the girls speak when the goblins come informs the reader that these sisters innately know that they aren’t supposed to eat the goblins’ fruit. Right away, it is conveyed that the goblin men are not trusted, since Laura says,

*We must not look at goblin men,  
We must not buy their fruits:  
Who knows upon what soil they fed  
Their hungry thirsty roots?* (Rossetti 1652)

Rossetti uses sensual language in describing their fruits, emphasizing this almost unnatural appeal to them. For example, the cherries are described as “plump unpecked cherries,” pomegranates as “pomegranates full and fine,” and peaches as “bloom-down-cheeked peaches” (Rossetti 1650-1651). Lizzie says, “Their evil gifts [fruits] will harm us” (Rossetti 1652). These fruits are “fruit forbidden” and within them, represent temptation and desire for these maidens (Rossetti 1661).

Soon after, Lizzie runs home. Laura chose to linger and her desire for the fruit overcomes her. She decides that the goblins sound “kind and full of loves” (Rossetti 1652). However, the poet describes the goblin men as “brother with sly brother,” portraying them as devious and dangerous (Rossetti 1653). When Laura tells the goblins that she has no “coin” to buy their fruit, they tell her she can pay in hair (Rossetti 1653). Laura gives up a piece of her hair in exchange to “suck their fruit globes fair or red” (Rossetti 1653). It can be inferred that the goblin men seduce her with their dishonest charm into eating their ripe fruits. Even further, this event could represent that Laura’s lust is too strong, that she has given into her desire, and she has given her virginity to the goblin men, “[dropping] a tear more rare than a pearl” as she does (Rossetti 1653). When Laura is finished indulging, the poet describes her as not knowing “was it night or day,” which could represent an ecstasy-like, or orgasmic state (Rossetti 1654).

Sally Mitchell, author of *The Fallen Angel*, says that for a Victorian woman, “‘virtue’ and ‘physical chastity’ were interchangeable terms” (Mitchell x). Therefore, being a poem from the Victorian era, it can be inferred that after giving the goblin men her hair in exchange for fruit, Laura becomes this “goblin-ridden,” fallen woman (Rossetti 1661). This makes sense considering in the days to come, Laura can no longer see or hear the goblins, and “she dwindled, as the fair full moon doth turn to swift decay” (Rossetti 1657).

The difference between many Victorian, fallen women and Laura is the fact that Laura is redeemed in the end by another woman, her sister. This ending makes Rossetti’s poem progressive for its era.

When Laura returns home from the goblin men, the poet describes Lizzie and her in bed together as “folded in each other’s wings (arms),” and “cheek to cheek and breast to breast” (Rossetti 1655). While some critiques see lesbianism occurring, it can also be inferred that women’s love is strengthening and healing.

In the end, Lizzie can’t stand seeing Laura suffering and stands up to the goblins and even tricks them by getting enough of the goblins’ fruit juice to save her. However, Rossetti’s sensual language and imagery lend readers a

different interpretation. It seems that Lizzie sacrifices her body to the goblins, as they physically abuse her. While rape is not explicitly mentioned, they do hold her hands back, tear her dress, and “squeeze their fruits against her mouth” (Rossetti 1659). When the goblin men are tired of Lizzie, Lizzie runs home with goblin fruit juice all over her, and yells for Laura to “suck her juices, eat her, drink her, love her, and to make much of her” (Rossetti 1661). When Laura sucks the juices from Lizzie’s body “with a hungry mouth,” the juice works as an antidote and she goes through a painful healing process (Rossetti 1661). This portrayal represents that it is really Lizzie’s sacrifice and love for her sister that works to redeem Laura’s fallen purity.

The poem ends with a message from Laura about the importance of sisterhood:

*For 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.* (Rossetti 1663)

Without this recurrence of sensuality, it would be easy to read this poem for exactly what Laura says at the end. And, while Laura’s message is part of the greater message, all of Rossetti’s sensual language and imagery presses a deeper idea from the poem. It seems that Rossetti is challenging the patriarchal, Victorian society by emphasizing the taboo, but completely natural sexuality of women. Rossetti also portrays this progressive idea: that women may redeem each other or “fetch one [another] if one goes astray” if they only choose to (Rossetti 1663).