



## CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S 'GOBLIN MARKET' AS A REFLECTION OF THE POET'S OWN LIFE

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### Abstract

Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' is one of the most perplexing poems of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A surface reading of the poem would point to a fantastic tale of evil goblin men and the triumph of good over evil, a simple enough poem for children which has a singsong repetition of words and sounds like a nursery rhyme. The fact that the poem has perplex readers and scholars through the ages means that there have been multiple interpretations and readings of this seemingly simple poem.

**Keywords:** biography, religious, feminist, temptation, redemption

Christina Rossetti wrote *Goblin Market* in 1859 which coincided with her volunteering at St. Mary Magdalene Penitentiary in Highgate (Roe, 2014). This Anglo-Catholic institution was dedicated to the rehabilitation and reform of "fallen women" and considered to be quite radical and pioneering in the value and worth it attributed to women who were considered outcasts in society. The poem was published in 1862, in the volume "*Goblin Market and Other Poems*" and became Rossetti's most popular poem. The poem established Christina Rossetti as a poet and was both a popular and critical success.

There have been various responses to this poem from the allegorical to the literal interpretation. The general narrative of the poem which is structure around temptation and redemption lends itself to a religious reading of the poem to those who view it from the perspective of a Judeo-Christian worldview. But to some critics and scholars, the theme of temptation and sisterly redemption has an undertone of a feminist perspective. A more literal reading would see the

clear reflection of the problems of misuse of drugs and addiction.

According to Gaynell Galt, "With the possibility of multiple readings, as well as Rossetti's perhaps evasive assertion that the poem was intended for children, we can say that "*Goblin Market*" lends itself irresistibly to an allegorical reading. The elements of the supernatural contained within "*Goblin Market*" seem to make it a children's tale, but the other possibilities are too apparent for adults to overlook. Rossetti's writing is intriguing on many levels and raises numerous questions." (80)

Whichever way one chooses to read this poem, an examination of the life of its author would ensure that one doesn't stray too far from what was at the center of the author's life and experience when the poem was written.

Let us look at the plot of the story which Deborah Ann Thompson called "both simple and provocative." (89) It is the story of two sisters, Laura and Lizzie, who lived together in what seems to be a secluded place. They don't seem to have much

interaction with the outside world and we hear their warning and cautioning each other about resisting the call of the goblin men and their fruits. Laura succumbs to the temptation and binge on the fruit in exchange for a lock of her golden hair. Everything changes after she had had her fill. She could no longer see or hear the goblin men the next day. She craves for the goblin fruits and became mad with desire, unable to sleep, no appetite for normal food and too weak and unbalanced to do anything productive. Desperate to help her sister, Lizzie decides to go out and attempt to buy fruit from the goblin men. Lizzie manages to get hold of the fruit while resisting the attempt of the goblin men to forcibly make her eat. Lizzie reached her sister dripping with the pulp and juice. Laura tastes the fruits on her sister's face and it became a healing balm to her troubled soul and sick mind and body.

Coming back to the poet, Christina Rossetti grew up in a household of four siblings, two sisters and, two brothers. Her father, Gabriele Rossetti was Italian and a poet and writer himself. Christina Rossetti was very close to her mother, Francesca Polidori. Francesca, who had been trained as a governess, taught the four children to read and write and provided them with religious instructions from the Bible and Christian literature. Christina, along with her sister Maria was home-schooled while the brothers, William and Dante Gabriel went to public schools. Christina was said to be very close to her mother, all of her books, except two were dedicated to her mother (Galt). The Rossettis' were a close family despite their idiosyncrasies and Christina was believed to have been profoundly affected by her family members in the formation of her identity and her writing. Dr. Polidori the infamous companion to Lord Byron and Shelley was her mother, Francesca Polidori's brother. Dr. Polidori was believed to have supplied Byron and his hedonistic circle of friends with laudanum, a painkiller to be used as a recreational drug. Christina's brother, Dante Gabriel a poet and painter himself, and was addicted to chloral hydrate. His wife, Elizabeth Siddal, Christina's sister-in-law committed suicide by overdosing on laudanum (1986:46). So, the misuse of drugs and the debilitating effect of drug addiction loomed large over 'Goblin Market'. The very description of the

goblin men selling their wares reminds one of the drug peddlers who enticed potential addicts with seductive descriptions of their products. Let us look at a line from the poem,

"Come buy, come buy/Apple and quinces/Lemons and Oranges/Plump unpecked cherries, Melon and raspberries..."

The description of each fruit is more luscious than the previous one, meant to tease the senses. Laura, in spite of her misgivings and the warning of her sister is unable to resist the luscious wares of the goblin men. But she didn't have money to buy the wares. The goblin men don't seem to be interested in money. They ask to have a part of her body in exchange for the fruits. So she cut a lock of her hair, basically selling her soul and became intoxicated with the fruits. Laura returns home to Lizzie in a daze and exhibited the characteristic of somebody high on drugs. The next day, Laura is already an addict, disinterested in household work, eating, or any other activities. To her horror she realized she could no longer hear the goblin men or see them and seemingly suffered withdrawal symptoms. She is in pain, her hair grew thin and grey, she is decaying and dying. The poem can thus be read as a strong indictment of the misuse of drugs and its destructive influence on those addicted to it.

Men are conspicuous by their absence in the poem. There is ambiguity in the description of the only goblin men who cannot be considered fully men. Animal imagery is used to describe the goblin men; they are "cat-faced" and "rat-paced". So the absence of men and attributing an animal-like quality to the only men present in the poem i.e the goblin perhaps points to a world where only women are considered to be truly "human". This brings us to the obvious celebration of female relationships and the role women play in building each other up. Lizzie managed to get fruits from the goblin men for her sister without bartering any part of her body though she was bruised and wounded. Christina grew up at an age where things were very difficult for a woman no matter how intelligent or creative. Both her brothers, William and Dante Gabriel were part of a group that emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century called the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood comprising of young

men, mostly painters and poets. Christina even contributed a poem for a magazine published by the brotherhood. Dante Gabriel proposed his sister, Christina as an honorary member but the brethren would admit no women and he withdrew his suggestion. (1986:xii).

To understand the implication of reading the poem as a Christian allegory one has to go back to the story of Eve's temptation in Eden and Christ redemption on the cross. Eve was tempted by a serpent to eat the forbidden fruit and she along with Adam succumbed to the temptation. Jesus Christ, the son of God became man so that he could be the sacrifice that redeemed the race of Adam and Eve from eternal death. Christina was a devout Christian, greatly influenced by her sister Maria and her mother Francesca. According to her biographer she rejected two of her suitors on religious ground (1986:40). This commitment to her faith is clearly defined in the poem.

If we look at how Laura's healing and restoration are accomplished, we see how Lizzie became a physical substitute for her sister. She went to the goblin men on her sister's behalf, was manhandled and wounded for Laura's sake but was able to bring back the fruit juices using the tool of her own body. This mirrored Christ's redemption on the cross where he became a substitute for sinners.

The poem, thus, we see is open to multiple interpretations. There has been speculation that Christina Rossetti insisted on the poem being written simply as a fairy tale for children to avoid intrusive questions and curiosity. But one conclusive thing is that the poem reflects various aspects of her life and experiences.

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