

VIVEKANANDA COLLEGE
THAKURPUKUR
KOLKATA-700063

NAAC ACCREDITED 'A' GRADE



Topic: Goblin Market - An Introduction

Course Title: 19th Century British Literature

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Name of the Teacher: Nabankur Roy

Name of the Department: English

'Goblin Market' — An Introduction

↳ Christina Rossetti

classmate

Date

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(Composed in April, 1859 and published in 1862)

Theme → Victorian poetry

In 'Goblin Market', Christina Rossetti experiments with language, form and imagery to create a world of temptation and mystery.

Summary

Set in a fairytale world and exploring themes of temptation, sacrifice and salvation, 'Goblin Market' tells the story of a fraught encounter between sisters, Laura and Lizzie, and evil goblin merchants. When Laura exchanges a lock of her golden hair for the chance to taste the goblin's enchanted fruit forbidden to her, she deteriorates until she is knocking at Death's door. Her sister Lizzie offers to pay the goblin's 'a silver penny' for more of their wares, which she hopes will act as an antidote to Laura's malady. The goblins violently attack Lizzie, smearing their fruits against her mouth in a vain attempt to make her eat. After the goblins are worn out by her resistance, Lizzie returns home, and Laura kisses the juices from her sister's face and is restored.

Form and genre

On first reading, 'Goblin Market', eminent Victorian critic John Ruskin declared that Christina Rossetti's 'irregular measures' were the 'calamity of modern poetry' and that she 'should exercise herself in the severest commonplace of metre until she can write as the public like'.

Ruskin's tin-eared critique unwittingly identifies

one of 'Goblin Market's' greatest strengths is its experimental form. A poem whose compelling narrative is animated by a surprising lyric energy, it never conforms to a set rhyme scheme or metrical pattern. For instance, the goblin merchants' cries in the opening lines not through lavish verbal description, but through form. The sing-song rhythm of alternating dactylic and trochaic feet mimics the sound of street vendors hawking their wares, while the rhyme scheme eschews traditional corresponding rhyme words in favour of the incantatory repetition of 'berries' and a seductive sibilance that hints at the fruits' dark properties. What is essentially a shopping list is transformed by the musical qualities of Rossetti's technique, anticipating Walter Pater's Aesthetic creed that 'all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music'. Drawing on the conventions of a variety of literary genres including the gothic, fantasy, biblical, children's literature and fable, Rossetti creates a disorienting fairytale atmosphere that is simultaneously seductive and alienating.

Context

Rossetti wrote this poem in 1859 while volunteering at the St. Mary Magdalene Penitentiary for 'fallen women' in Highgate. Dedicated to the reform and rehabilitation of prostitutes, this Anglo-Catholic institution was remarkable in the period for its conviction that women who had transgressed sexually could be redeemed. Biographers and critics have argued that the themes of temptation, sexual exchange

and sisterly redemption in this poem are influenced by its poet's experience working as an 'Associate Sister' at Highgate.

The poem first appeared in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862). Rossetti's skillful and original blend of sound and sense delighted critics and readers alike, although critical plaudits initially exceeded commercial sales. Its fairytale cadences led the *Spectator* to declare it 'a true children's poem', yet the paper also noted that its adult themes of temptation, transgression and redemption also appealed to a mature readership.

Interpretations

Initially received as a moral allegory about the dangers of giving into temptation, the poem was recast by feminist classic *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) as a parable of female resistance and solidarity. By contrast, in 1973 *Playboy Magazine* presented the poem as unambiguously pornographic; the text was accompanied by a Kinuko Craft illustration of the goblin attack on Lizzie that left little to the imagination. 'Goblin Market' continues to appeal to a popular audience; it has been set to music many times and adapted as a play by Polly Pen and Peggy Harmon in New York (1986) and Nick Hedges in London (1995).

The 20th century revival of interest in the poem opened the floodgates for Feminist, Marxist, Freudian, Queer Theory and New Historicist critiques which variously interpreted the poem as a warning about the dangers

of a free-market economy, a protest against hazardous practices in 19th century food adulteration, a Christian tale of sacrifice and salvation, a parable of lesbian empowerment, a fable about anorexia, an expression of incestuous yearning and a tribute to the delicious oral and aural pleasures of poetry itself. 'Goblin Market' has continued to thrive in the academic marketplace. The poem continues to attract critical interpretations and artistic adaptations as 'colourful and diverse as the goblin merchants' wares, challenging Christina Rossetti's surely disingenuous claim that she 'did not mean anything profound by this fairytale'.