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Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*: Finding the Middle Ground

“Lizzie with an open heart,
 Laura in an absent dream,
 One content, one sick in part;
 One warbling for the mere bright day's delight,
 One longing for the night.”
 -- Christina Rossetti

Since its publication, literary and social critics have interpreted Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* in many ways. Some critics uphold it is a masterpiece empowering women. Others think much less of it due to the inconsistencies within the text. This fairy-tale poem portrays two girls, Lizzie and Laura, tempted by goblin men selling a generous variety of fruits in a glen. Lizzie chooses to resist their cries of “Come buy, come buy,” while Laura gives in and trades a lock of her golden hair for the taste of their harvest, becoming insane with longing for it afterwards. At the end, Lizzie breaks the spell of the goblins on Laura by withstanding their torture and hazing. Most of the critics' interpretations are focused on either sexuality or the gender war between men and women. However, by assuming Peter Cominos's Innocent Femina Sensualis in Unconscious Conflict as a basis for analysis, a new reading of the text emerges that embodies both interpretations. Rossetti's poem depicts two “sisters”¹ who share a bond stronger than the bond between a man and a woman claiming, “For there is no friend like a sister/ In calm or stormy weather” (58) With the two girls, Lizzie and Laura, Rossetti acknowledges the two extreme perceptions of women as passionless angels and whores (Cominos 163, 165). Through

¹ Lizzie and Laura can be literal sisters or metaphorical sisters. The metaphorical interpretation alleges that they are sisters because they belong to the female community and not because they are blood-related.

the poem, she reconciles the two extremes by suggesting that there is a middle ground between the pure and the impure due to that bond of sisterhood.

Upon a closer reading of the seemingly self-explanatory line, “Maids heard the goblins cry,” one discovers that Rossetti begins with the early Victorian perspective² that women are innocent. One of the current definitions of a “maid” is “a girl or young unmarried woman”; meanwhile, the archaic definition is “a virgin.” The goblins, as other interpretations conclude,³ represent men. In her description of the goblins, Rossetti gives them animal features:

One had a cats face,
 One whisked a tail,
 One tramped at rat’s pace,
 One crawled like a snail,
 One like a wombat prowled obtuse and furry,
 One like a ratel tumbled hurry skurry. (8)

By presenting men as animal-like goblins, Rossetti captures the initial Victorian belief that men possess sexual instincts, and if left untamed, men will “look like monkeys, lacking in self-control” (Cominos 162). This is Rossetti’s premise of her evaluation of the Victorian perspective of women: they are innocent and pure while men were animalistic and seducers.

Next, appears the list of fruits the goblins had to sell. It begins with apples, which are often associated with the forbidden fruit Eve consumed in the Garden of Eden. The reference to the forbidden fruit addresses the religious downfall of women. In his essay, Cominos also acknowledges this downfall, “When *Femina Sensualis* was tainted or tarnished with the knowledge of good and evil and made conscious of her own erotic desires, she became a model in conscious conflict” (165). Before, Victorians had believed women to be passionless. Then in

² The Victorian period was the early 19th Century.

³ Leighton, Angela, ed. *Victorian Women Poets: A Critical Reader*. (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996) 135., Mark, Aine. "Analysis of the Goblin Market." www.BookStove.com, 28 Dec 2007. 10 Mar 2009 <<http://www.bookstove.com/Poetry/Analysis-of-the-Goblin-Market.74415>>.

the 1890's, their view of women changed accepting that women feel sexual desires as well; it is not just men. In listing all the other fruits, Rossetti also cleverly corrects the popularly held belief that the forbidden fruit was an apple. In the Bible, the forbidden fruit is not identified as an apple; it remains a mystery what it really was. The ambiguity of its identity reinforces the idea that anything can be the forbidden fruit. It is different for each woman, each person. The temptation does not necessarily have to be sexual but for the Victorians, temptations often had sexual connotations.

Having shifted from the perspective of women as purely innocent angels to that of tainted women, Rossetti presents Laura as a fallen woman because she consumes the fruits of the goblins and Lizzie as an upright woman because she does not. The Victorians believed that women, in both perspectives, have a choice either to give in to their sexual desires or to resist them and channel them into an acceptable outlet such as religion. Cominos addresses this shift in perspective, “[L]ike the innocent model, the tainted one worked out her conflict either virtuously or viciously” (165-6). The innocent model entails women to repress their sexual feelings out of consciousness meaning women are consciously aware of their sexual desires. However, those feelings still exist and subconsciously influence women's actions. Therefore, there is an unconscious conflict, which can be resolved virtuously or viciously. If a woman works through the conflict through dreams and fantasies, she is virtuous. If a woman submits to “the assault of the aggressive male,” she resolves her conflict viciously (Cominos 164). On the other hand, the tainted model implies that women are aware of their sexual desires and thus, it is a conscious conflict. Nonetheless, the choice of resolutions remains the same. They can either resist their sexual desires, the virtuous decision, or give in and act upon them, the vicious decision (Cominos 165). In *Goblin Market*, Lizzie and Laura have the same choice to make: resist the goblins’

temptations or give in. Lizzie, “the innocent model,” chooses to be virtuous. When she hears the goblins selling their harvest at the beginning of the poem, she immediately represses any chance of yielding to their cries by “veil[ing] her blushes,” “cover[ing] up her eyes,” thrusting her fingers in her ears, and running away from the glen (3-7). On the other hand, Laura, “the tainted one,” gives in to her own sinful nature when she could have decided to refuse the goblins’ enticing cries of “Come buy, come buy.”

Continuing the analysis in accordance to Cominos’s text, one realizes that Lizzie helps Laura achieve, in his words, “the state of consciousness akin to innocence” (166). Laura can never return to her original state of innocence because she gave in to temptation and tasted the fruits of the goblins. After consuming the accursed crops, Laura is “in an absent dream...sick in part...longing for the night” (22). On the contrary, once Lizzie hands her salvation, Laura becomes *like* her former innocent self: “Her gleaming locks showed not one thread of grey,/ Her breath was sweet as May/ And light danced in her eyes” (56). She attains that “state of consciousness akin to innocence” (Cominos 166). Her memory of those miserable days of devilish yearning, “the gnawing negative conscience” (Cominos 166), keeps her virtuous again. Although Laura is no longer under the physical curse of her sin, it is still her burden to carry, to tell the story to her children at the end of the poem. With each retelling, she has to relive each moment of her distressed past.

In contrast to Laura, readers will initially perceive Lizzie as pure and innocent, but through a closer reading of the poem, they will discover that this was not so because Lizzie soils her purity when she goes and seeks the goblins in attempt to help her sister. Terrence Holt’s analysis of *Goblin Market* gives basis for this argument. He contends that in trying to save Laura, Lizzie “leaves the market marked by goblin pens.” Interpreting the assault of the goblins as

sexual violence, Lizzie must have lost her virginity, and therefore, she is no longer innocent when she leaves the market (Leighton 137). Nonetheless, this argument only goes as far as demonstrating that Lizzie becomes tainted after her encounter with the goblins. In order to make a more relatable claim, one must view her encounter from another perspective.

In the Victorian society, those who were pure had to separate themselves from those who were not. According to Cominos, the “pure” rejected the impure because they despised those same character flaws in themselves. They projected their own unacceptable desires onto the fallen. Yet, instead of keeping her distance from Laura, Lizzie did the opposite. She wants to release her sister from the chains of her transgression. One acknowledges that Lizzie becomes tainted in that she interacts with the goblins and asks them for their fruits. If she had chosen to be purely innocent, she would not have done so. She would have stayed away from the goblins and Laura. Rossetti is trying to convey to her readers that their view of the “pure” is wrong. The “pure” should not be ridiculing those who had fallen. Instead, they should be trying to help them rise up again and achieve that “state of consciousness akin to innocence” (Cominos, 166). There is a bond of sisterhood between women because they belong to the same gender. Rossetti knew this from experience. Although her brother was one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelites and she contributed to their cause, he did not formally offer her membership into the fellowship because it was a *brotherhood*. It is possible that Rossetti formed a similar fellowship of her own with the other women in association with the Pre-Raphaelites. She knew that men banded together and thus, so must women; otherwise, each woman would be alone. A greater sin would be to reject the fallen and deny them any path to redemption. Rossetti reinforces that idea with Lizzie’s success in saving Laura from her despair, consequently reconciling the two extreme views of women.

During the Victorian Era, the perception of women shifted many times. Initially during the 19th Century, the Victorians viewed women as being born angels while men were animals. Nevertheless, later in the century, they recognized women as being corrupt due to Eve's act of sin. Thus, women had two choices: give in to their sinful nature or repress them and live a passionately religious life. Thus, there emerged the two extremes of women: angels or whores. Rossetti reconciles the two by finding a middle ground. She proposes through her poem that the "pure" women should help the fallen ones because they have the bond of sisterhood. Rossetti herself practiced the consolation of the "Victorian fallen woman" in her lifetime by compiling scrapbooks of religious poetry and art to share with those women whom society had deemed as "fallen." Therefore, Rossetti emphasizes that Lizzie and Laura are sisters, whether literally or symbolically, and how Lizzie breaks the norm to save Laura. Paradoxically, Lizzie, in the eyes of the Victorians, becomes corrupt because she helps Laura redeem herself, but she is also perceived as a pure angel precisely because she enables Laura to attain salvation. That is the middle ground: women should band together and help each other, pure or impure.

Works Cited

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