

# Erotic undertones in "goblin market"



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Christina Rossetti grew up among a family of skilled writers and artists whose muses had to do with contemporary life and past scholarship, yet they were strictly evangelical Christians. Christina Rossetti strictly followed the expectations of this ideal (Everett). There has been much conjecture that she lived a self-repressed life in which she revealed her passions for certain men through her poetic works since they did not share similar religious values, and she lived vicariously through her less repressed brother and his friends (Gilbert & Gubar 874). The implications of these incompatible and contrasting dynamics can be read through her poetry, particularly "Goblin Market," published in 1862 (RPO). "Goblin Market" uses imagery, symbolism and erotic characterization of the sisters Laura and Lizzie to symbolically discuss the way that women's relationships with men undermine women's value and worth, and that women can only realize their full potential through relationships with other women. Although these relationships are not limited to sexual or romantic ones, the relationship between the sisters is eroticized in order to starkly emphasize the way in which women can bring beauty and greatness out of other women, while men's degradation tends to only use women up. The fruits in this poem are described in a sexual way through the words "wild free born cranberries," "sweet to tongue," and "luscious," and the way Lizzie describes them as "evil gifts" (lines 11, 30, 61 and 66). The fruits are also from various locations in the world and fresh at different times of the year, yet they are all part of the goblin's market, which suggests some preternatural or supernatural aspect of these goblin men, and also suffices to make the fruits both more coveted and more forbidden. The goblins selling the fruit are inherently deceitful; Laura and Lizzie's attempts to resist their offers show that they are chaste and would like to avoid giving in to such

tricks that may cause them to "[pine] and [pine] away," and "dwindle and [grow] gray," like their friend Jeanie who gave in (lines 154, 156). However, Laura is slightly more receptive and curious to their forbidden offers, which is detrimental to her. This could have been similarly dangerous for a woman in the latter half of 19th century England, especially had she been focused on her stringent Anglican way of life. This danger is conspicuous when the Goblins sneak up on Laura and give each other sly looks, signifying their licentious plotting (line 95-96). The golden curl that they request from Laura indicates a shift; since she cried when she hands it over, it is conspicuously valuable to her in a personal way, and she grapples with her emotions in submitting to provide her golden curl. However, since it is payment to the goblin men, this shows that they value her hair as a commodity, but also since hair can represent feminine beauty, they are taking away some of her beauty in exchange for "fruits" which come to represent brief sensual pleasure and then decay. This is interesting when situated in the late 1800's, a time when marriage was becoming based more upon "mutual love" than on dowry or social advancement (Yalom 180). The social conventions and conception of women at this time went along with the new marriage ideals in that, with the focus of marriage being on love, women tried to attract such love by being "as physically attractive as possible" (Yalom 183). This part of the poem suggests that women's beauty and youth is their sole importance to men, and that once it is taken from the women, their life begins to fade, they are no longer wanted, and they are left to waste away after brief moments of pleasure. The eating of the fruit can be equated with Laura (and previously Jeanie) having lost her virginity. However, it can be seen as giving up her beauty or vitality to a man in a more general sense; for instance, a

woman's main roles at this time were to " obey and satisfy one's husband [through] keeping one's children physically and morally sound and maintaining the household," and these could all be seen as ways in which she " sold" herself only to be taken advantage of and used up, but never actually fulfilled (Yalom 180). The fruits had an intoxicating effect on her as she " sucked their fruit globes fair or red," until " her lips were sore," but she left with no knowledge of what time of day it was (lines 127, 136). Laura is noticeably altered, and her connection with her sister is somewhat broken because of the connection with the goblin men and their fruits which have replaced it. Interestingly, this overt sexuality when Laura eats the fruit is replaced with a more natural and innate kind of sexuality which Rossetti refers to when she describes the two sisters—now inevitably distinct from one another— as " Folded in each other's wings," " Cheek to cheek and breast to breast, Locked together in one nest" (line 186 and line 197-98). While this is not as conspicuously eroticized as Laura's goblin encounter, there is especial attention paid to their proximity and the manner in which their bodies gently touch. Laura's anxieties when she realizes she no longer hears the goblins yet her sister does, bear semblance to the thoughts a woman may have once she has wasted prime years of her youth and happiness giving too much of herself to a man, in the lines " Must she no more such succous pasture find, Gone deaf and blind? Her tree of life dropped from the root" (line 257-60). This anxiety is again contrasted with the potential gratification she could experience through her relationship with her sister, like the night earlier, but rather she is stricken " passionate yearning," which is similar to a kind of malaise. The subsequent yearning and concern and palpable emptiness following her brief rapture is significant as compared with her prior serenity

of mind. The encounter of her eating the fruit and the frantic obsession she had afterwards represent even an intoxicated ecstasy that blinds a woman until sobering light of day, much like how Laura's hair turns "thin and gray," and the rapid progression of time "burn[ed] her fire away" when "noon waxed bright" (276-280). The Goblin men did not literally bring Laura to decay, but they played a large part in persuading her to make the choice that did. The Goblin men represent destructive sexuality, which is demonstrated through the way they initially sexualize Laura and she starts decaying, but more explicitly when they "Hugged and kissed [Lizzie]: Squeezed and caressed her," but then violently "tore her gown and soiled her stocking" when she refuses to eat the fruit (348-49 and 403). The once-romanticized notion of the forbidden men with their forbidden fruit turns into a terrifying violent reality which they enact shamelessly, and negates the possibility of Laura's succumbing to their deception earlier as appearing at all beautiful or vibrantly sexual; instead, it shows that these goblin men have intentions which they do all they can to fulfill, which involve taking advantage of the women and using force. The sexuality, then, between men and women in this poem is portrayed as destructive and dangerous, which is alleviated only by Lizzie's courage and the interaction which saves Laura when Lizzie cries "Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices" and "Eat me, drink me, love me; Laura, make much of me" (line 468 and 471-72). While these words are inherently sensual, they are not ominous and representative of sublime unknown powers of the goblin men. They echo the words Rossetti used in describing Laura eating the fruit of the goblin men, but it is more muted, since Lizzie has impassioned desperate cries to her sister, rather than the sly looks and voices in unison of the goblins. Also, Laura then ate the fruit for

the first time in ecstatic ignorance, and now she consumes the antidote, first in caution, but then from the skin of her trusting sister who has sacrificed herself for Laura. Similarly, as if it is a realization of her only way to find fulfillment, Laura, " After long sultry drouth; Shaking with anguish fear, and pain, kiss'd and kiss'd her with a hungry mouth" (490-92). Complete fruition of the antidote and Lizzie's efforts is realized when Laura " awoke as from a dream," which Rossetti describes as " life out of death;" importantly, Laura's golden hair is back to normal and her eyes are full of light, demonstrating her vitality, yet she is not " sick in part" or afflicted with an elusive malady like when she first eats the fruit (lines 537, 524, 212). In this way, Rossetti effectively corrects sexual relationships with men where women are singularly self-sacrificial, with the eroticized relationship of the sisters, where presumably, they would both sacrifice for the other's fulfillment, as Lizzie did. Not only does Lizzie revive Laura from braving the goblins and getting the antidote and from compassionately watching her throughout the night, but Laura's ability to be renewed from Lizzie also brings Lizzie new life fulfillment. Lizzie's quest also provides her a new understanding of herself and a sense of pride, which would not have been gained without Laura's transgression to begin with. Although the sisters are not " lovers" in the conventional sense, Rossetti uses sexual connotations in their encounters in order to symbolically show the way that such relationships may offer far more gratification, and even live-saving properties, than relationships between women and men. Women appreciate other women due to their ability to empathize and understand their condition, rather than attribute monetary worth to their bodies and try to use it for all that they can. Rossetti mitigates and qualifies the intense imagery and blatant sexual undertones of

the poem in the last stanza, where the earlier elaborated-upon antidote is called "fiery" and the tone is more loving than sensual, in the words "For there is no friend like a sister" (559, 562).