

Considerations for 'goblin market' as canonical



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Literary theorist Terry Eagleton once remarked in 1983 ' Literature is any kind of writing which for some reason or another somebody values highly'. The literary Canon is comprised of a selection of the ' classics', which all fit the canonical criteria established by critics to determine the value and thus the eligibility of set works to entry into the canon. Rossetti's poem ' Goblin Market' seems timeless in its ability to consistently merit special attention from critics and readers alike through the diversity of possible interpretations that can be deduced from its multivalent content. Arguably, it is this critical interest in Rossetti's poetry, which particularly swelled in the final decades of the twentieth century, largely impelled by the emergence of feminist criticism, alongside the timeless issues that her work addresses, that places Rossetti beside some of the greatest authors in literature.

In their book ' Ways of Reading', Montgomery et al. concur that the literary works of major distinction and thereby those considered to be canonical are distinguished by their ' complexity of' ' language' and ' ideas', which, interwoven, can be seen to constitute the ' aesthetic unity' of a text. Given that complexity is a ' synonym of value', Rossetti's ' Goblin Market' can be considered ' valuable' due to the juxtaposition of the poem's form to its content through which the reader can identify a complex but ' unified pattern'. With a rhyming cadence and fable-like ending ' Goblin Market' could easily be interpreted as intended for children. Indeed after its initial publication in 1862, Rossetti often stated in public that the poem was intended for children, a claim that remained unchallenged until the final decades of the twentieth century. However, even when the protagonists in the narrative encounter sexually suggestive situations such as the

animalistic and 'evil' behavior of the 'goblin men' as they 'squeezed their fruits' against Lizzie's unwilling mouth to 'make her eat', which many feminist critics interpret as rape, the language of the poem maintains its child-like tone through its fast-paced narrative and sensuous imagery of the 'blossoms honey-sweet' which creates visible tension between a juvenile form and a sexualized content. In choosing to create this complex paradox Christina Rossetti is able to highlight female sexuality and desire through her poem in a public forum under the facade of a fable, which as a female writer in the 1800s would not have allowed her to do more explicitly. As such, 'Goblin Market' is an important insight and condemnation of a staunchly conservative Victorian age that in forbidding such items as the 'bloom-down-cheeked-peaches' to the two protagonists show how female sexual desires were suppressed in an imperfect society. Furthermore, Rossetti warns that the consumption of these 'forbidden fruit', symbolizing a woman expressing her female sexuality, ultimately brings destruction as she becomes a 'fallen woman' and can 'buy no more' condemned to live as a social outcast. Arguably it is this insight into female oppression in Victorian society expressed through literature that allows 'Goblin Market' and Rossetti herself to maintain their canonical status.

An allegorical reading into 'Goblin Market' is one of the many diverse interpretations that evoke the interest of critics, which arguably is the principal reason why the narrative is still studied in traditional English Literature syllabi, and thus why Rossetti deserves her canonical status. The content of 'Goblin Market' reflects the fundamental story of the Christian idea of fall and redemption within the overall plan of life and the many sins

along the way such as temptation which is illustrated in the ' forbidden fruit' that is used to entice the ' maids'. If ' Goblin Market' is read as a religious allegory, Laura can be characterized as the more human or naturally flawed of the two sisters who becomes addicted to the goblin men's ' sweet to the tongue' fruit which Rossetti describes in Laura's animalistic mannerisms in her obvious yearning for the ' sugar-sweet' ' dainty fruit' describing her as a ' rush-imbedded swan' when its ' last restraint is gone'. On the other hand Lizzie, with her wise sensibility that supersedes that of her sister's, has the strength to resist the temptation of ' the evils gifts' of the goblin men, acting as a Christ-like figure by withholding her emotions, standing ' white and golden', evoking religious connotations of purity, and sacrificing herself in order to redeem the sins of her sister, Laura. This sacrificial act mirrors the sacrifice that Jesus made for the sins and transgressions of mankind.

Through reading ' Goblin Market' as a re-enactment of the temptation at the Garden of Eden and a moral allegory, Rossetti identifies with the universal ideas of temptation, indulgence and redemption that are at the heart of Christian values and thus timeless in any given society. Indeed in order for something to be judged canonical Montgomery et Al argue that they must deal with ' moral and philosophical topics' of acknowledged importance and have qualities of ' durability' that can endure time so if taken out of the contextual period within which they were written, they would still be of equal significance. As such it is this timelessness of the ideas that Rossetti challenges and identifies with in ' Goblin Market' that deems the narrative eligible for canonical status.

Furthermore, the emergence of feminist criticism in the 1970s meant 'Goblin Market' resurfaced with a new perspective as feminists began to take notice of 'Goblin Market' and comment on the gender issues Rossetti acknowledges, focusing particularly on how her position as a female poet writing in a Victorian, patriarchal society gave a unique insight into female suppression of sexual desires. This new interpretation of 'Goblin Market' showed that female empowerment was critical within the narrative. The idea that a female protagonist could possess Christ-like redemptive qualities is a radical occurrence in literature, for women had, until this point struggled to establish and maintain their place in literature both as writers and as heroic characters and thus a narrative that emphasizes the power of women to 'fetch one if one goes astray' and to 'lift one if one totters down' is fundamental. However, perhaps more radical is Rossetti's decision to steer away from equating female sexuality with sinfulness and transgression which was forbidden to Victorian women who were typically seen as 'too pure and sacred to share in disgusting lusts that afflicted men' as interpreted by Karen Armstrong, a novelist. Rossetti sympathetically explores the idea of the fallen women who trapped under the power of 'wicked' 'fruit-merchant men' are enticed into a corruptible sense of fulfillment, corruptible because it cannot last, Laura can buy the fruit only once but she does not realize that she can 'buy no more' of the 'dainty fruit' until after she has eaten it and has been rendered 'deaf' and 'blind'. However, Rossetti concerned herself equally with the way society deals with such women. Instead of ostracisation, Rossetti suggests society should be encouraged to sacrificially embrace the fallen woman as Lizzie embraces Laura creating an ideology of acceptance rather than judgement. Despite Laura's transgressions and sinful

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past she is able to live a normal life in the resolution as a 'mother' whereas in Rossetti's society, a woman once 'fallen' could not regain respectability. The feminist message of the poem therefore becomes just as much for the 'Lizzies' in Rossetti's society as the 'Lauras' for the redemption portrayed in *Goblin Market* is presented, under this feminist perspective, as not spiritual but social, condemning the values of an imperfect society. Additionally, the absence of any patriarchal influence is conspicuous in the final image of '*Goblin Market*' as the narrative becomes a valorisation of female solidarity and sisterhood. By choosing to end on this image of female empowerment many feminist critics argue that Rossetti's intention was to condemn a patriarchal and unequal society which disempowers women. To an extent, patriarchy and inequality is as relevant in the conservative Victorian age as in the modern day with unequal opportunities for women who many feminists still argue are deemed 'inferior' in a male-dominated World. The issue of gender equality is still of universal concern in the Twenty-First Century and thus '*Goblin Market*' can be seen to constitute as an example of the longevity of female oppression which Rossetti concludes can only be resolved through the strength of women to 'cheer' each other on the 'tedious way' to equality and 'strengthen' each other as 'one stands' in solidarity.

In conclusion, in '*Goblin Market*' Rossetti's addresses 'universal concerns' and radical 'changes in women's thinking' by allowing women to take centre stage in a narrative leaning it towards feminist critics who value the poem as a valorisation of sisterhood and the empowerment of women. Evidently it is the literary works which although written in a different age remain pertinent

in today's society which constitute the literary canon, thus it can be concluded that in order for a literary work to be eligible for canonical status it must principally address 'universal themes' which are believed to have significance 'for all time' as evaluated by Montgomery et al in their book 'Ways of Reading'.