

The satirical marriage proposal in goblin market



Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, disguised as a children's allegory to sinful pleasures, is a warning about the false promises and perils of marriage.

Comparisons to the divorce laws close to that time period and the metaphors of the injustice and misogyny throughout the poem drew conclusions that Rossetti could be arguing for change in how women were perceived—as seen in these marriage expectations.

Also, this poem exemplifies the problems with expectations of finding happiness upon fulfilling societal conventions, such as marriage. For instance, Jeanie's waiting on the goblin men's return until she aged is a metaphor to fidelity and its consequences when applied in the wrong circumstances. *Goblin Market* is rebellious in how the poem defies traditionally acclaimed qualities in the social and political climate of that time, when women were expected to appear and act according to certain rules without fair treatment.

During the Victorian period, a movement towards reasonable marriage and divorce laws was in progress; for instance, Parliament considered allowing divorce in the 1850s, but upon strict rules, primarily for women to suggest the separation (Wood, "Marriage and Divorce 19th Century Style"). However, heavily sexist concepts were still underlying this progress towards equality. In *Goblin Market*, Rossetti advocated higher rights and standards for women in marriages, and this essay will explore the unfair divorce laws of that time period which prompted the main themes of this poem.

For a woman to obtain legal separation from her husband, she must prove that he had committed adultery in combination with the following marital

offenses: desertion, bigamy, cruelty or incest. (Vicinus, 74). Throughout Goblin Market, three of the four offenses could be seen and committed by the goblin men.

The most obvious—cruelty—was evident in the goblins' treatment of Lizzie upon her refusal to consume the fruit. The goblins' desertion of Jeanie and Laura could also be categorized into women's legal reasons for divorce. Desertion and failed promises were portrayed in the imagery after Laura and Jeanie consumed the fruit; the "kernel stone" (line 138), which Laura was left to possess after the goblins had gone, gave her hope for their return and was eerily similar to the stone of an engagement ring. Furthermore, exchanging a lock of one's hair was traditionally deemed as a symbol of devotion, which Laura offered the goblins. In response to the exchange, Laura aged quickly; her hair grew brittle and grey. This could be a metaphor of relinquishing one's prime and youth to an unhappy marriage. The poem's structure mirrored both Jeanie's premature aging to the goblin's courtship and desertion; this technique expressed one of Goblin Market's main themes of unfulfilled marital hopes. The fruits captured the warmth of the sun, as emphasized by their descriptions of being from the South, geographically recognized to be experience an abundance in sunlight, yet the fruits did not provide their consumer the same warmth they appeared to possess. In fact, the fruits left its consumer hopeful for more of the tastes and memories evoked, and ultimately unsatisfied.

The last of the three offenses seen in Goblin Market committed by the goblin men was adultery. Lines 58-59 described one of the men carrying "a golden dish of many pounds weight" that supported the fruit. The adjective "

golden” in multiple associations with Lizzie and Laura implied that the dish could be involved in a deeper metaphor. Much like the roles of women in Victorian marriages, wives were thought to be ornamental, as seen in popular outfits of tightly cinched corsets that limited motion and brought great exhaustion—simply for the aesthetic quality deemed by society. Wives were also expected to support the husband almost like a maid, and not to intermingle with the certain society established by men. For example, as discussed in lecture, female authors—such as Mary Anne Evans—disguised their work under a male pseudonym to reach a wider audience and to be evaluated “ seriously”.

This relationship can be seen in the poem by how the dish worked to support the fruit, without being the main object of interest. Following this comparison of the golden dish to the traditional role of a wife, the emphasis on the weight of the dish implies responsibility and value. With the word “ golden” in multiple associations with the maidens, a possible metaphor could be drawn to the goblin man’s adultery; he sought out for more “ gold” despite already having such of his own. The significance of these women’s legal reasons for divorce in *Goblin Market* examines the extreme lengths a woman of that time period must endure to secure a divorce. By vividly depicting the accepted reasons for divorce—cruelty, desertion and adultery—this poem questions whether divorce should be used to prevent, rather than prove such cruelty.

In terms of imagery, Rossetti included numerous examples that defined the themes of female intellectual worth that should triumph the misogynistic implications of marital expectations and divorce laws of the time. For

<https://assignbuster.com/the-satirical-marriage-proposal-in-goblin-market/>

instance, since women were considered their property of their husbands during the Victorian era, her value would diminish upon the accusation of adultery. In fact, men could not only divorce with the simple accusation of his wife's adultery, but they could also sue their wives. (Vicinus page 74). Goblin Market echoed this theme of greed in multiple instances relating to the maiden's golden hair and the goblin's desperation to obtain it. Lines 191-192 correlated the maidens with gold, " Like two wands of ivory Tipped with gold for awful kings." The gold was almost always crowned upon the maiden's heads throughout the poem; perhaps Rossetti hoped to appeal to men who would also see intellectual value in women, as the previous lines exemplified.

Furthermore, the lack of emotional intimacy as expected in marriages—as perceived by the highly misogynistic divorce laws—could also be seen in Goblin Market. Laura and Lizzie displayed a more accurate representation of marriage, idealistically, than the toxic relationship between the maidens and the goblins.

Moreover, in lines 134, " She sucked and sucked and sucked the more.", Laura was described engaging in the same action with the goblins as with Lizzie later in the poem, but the diction was much different with Lizzie, "[She] Kissed and kissed and kissed her." (486). The similar structure of the same interaction—consuming the fruit juices—with the goblins and Lizzie with drastically different diction portrayed different levels of emotions involved in both interactions.

Also, the narrator portrayed the emotional intimacy in an ideal marriage in line 185, comparing Laura and Lizzie to pigeons sharing the same home. The bird imagery relating to the maidens—distinctly separating them from the men which were disguised as non-flight animals—created an interesting effect in line 77, “ She heard a voice like voice of doves.” Since the women were compared to birds such as swans and pigeons, the goblins speaking in voices of doves seemed to be communicating in meticulous, deceptive language that appealed to maidens. Doves were also traditionally symbolic for love. Once the protagonist, Laura, understood their deception, she was cured from the hope that led to Jeanie’s demise. Jeanie had died waiting for the goblin’s promised return with the fruit, and she did not survive to the springtime with her dependency on the goblins alone. One of the metaphorical promises in *Goblin Market* was starting a family and having children; repeated imagery of trees growing and dying in relation to the women and the goblin appeared throughout the text. Implications of family trees and lineage were strongly supported with the context in two instances of the poem. Laura’s consumption of the fruit from questionable soil had foreshadowed ominous consequences, and the poor quality of soil signified the lack of substance to sustain a tree—symbolically, a family tree. Moreover, line 260 eradicated all possibilities of Laura starting a family at that moment, “ Her tree of life drooped from the root.”

And lastly, the tree appeared once more when Laura was “ cured” by Lizzie, and Laura was described, “ Like a wind-uprooted tree.” (line 517). This could be interpreted as Laura’s breaking free from the bond and relationship established with the goblin men. Furthermore, the depictions of freedom in

line 505 could be interpreted as the liberation derived from realizing that marriage—with the rules established at that time—may not be the answer for personal or emotional fulfillment. Despite these pitfalls, induced by expectations for the fulfillment marriage could bring, marriage was a tempting concept to invest hope. The fruit in Goblin Market appealed to sensory imagery, and whenever Laura or Lizzie was near the fruit, their senses triumphed over rationality, “ And for the first time in her life Began to listen and look.” (lines 327-328). A clearer example of such could be seen in the beginning when Laura “ bowed her head” (line 34) to hear, an act of subduing logic to sensory feelings. Furthermore, line 51 suggested that the senses were separated from the self and had autonomy of their own when Lizzie “ covered her eyes lest they would look.” (line 51). The eyes appeared to act independently from logic and had to be physically restrained from following their natural inclinations. The relationship between the sensory feelings could be a metaphor to the reflexive instinct to follow societal norms of believing in marriage without questioning whether its rules were fair or brought happiness. There was a similar sense of comfort in both—following these established norms and indulging in the senses—without contemplation.

However, upon acknowledging that amendments were necessary to better the future for marriage, Goblin Market recognized the need to work with men instead of against them. In “ Symbol and Reality in Christina Rossetti’s Goblin Market”, Mosk drew similarities of the goblin men to the woodland animals in Rossetti’s childhood cottage, which she had presumably remembered fondly and nostalgically. (page 377). Relating that concept to

Goblin Market's themes, the various appearances the goblins adopted suggested that such selfishness is inevitably present in everyone. Such qualities could be seen in the female protagonist as well, when Laura allowed Lizzie to risk her life for her own benefit. Despite its didactic tone throughout against sinful behavior, Goblin Market was rather sympathetic towards its characters by granting each—except for Jeanie—pleasant fates. Perhaps this ending depicted forgiveness to the human inclination towards misbehavior. “Symbol and Reality in Christina Rossetti's Goblin Market” observed the poem's similarity to St. Augustine's Confessions, when the boy who plucked his neighbor's pears was claimed to be act from “evil” desires or intentions. (page 377). There was a sense of imbalance to brand such a small act of mischief in association of the word “evil”, and Goblin Market recognized this by granting forgiveness to its characters' misjudgments with its lack of consequences, even for the goblins' deceit and cruelty.

Despite its strong messages, Goblin Market's true themes remained mysterious, which reduced controversy and facilitated the poem's acceptance by a wide audience. The ambiguous ending raised questions to whether the children were from the goblin men since the husbands were never mentioned. However, Laura seemed to be away from Lizzie—although Lizzie was a largely relevant aspect in the children's lives—since Lizzie's presence remained defined by her past actions. The didactic and seemingly allegorical ending against sinful pleasures complicated this poem and safely disguised its many possible interpretations regarding society and marriage.

However, evidence strongly suggests that this poem entails a message towards specific readers. Goblin Market's main, intended audience appears

<https://assignbuster.com/the-satirical-marriage-proposal-in-goblin-market/>

to be addressed in the beginning as the maidens who heard the goblin's chants. The protagonists of the poem were also unmarried women tempted by the goblin's offerings. Since Rossetti never specified which maidens heard the goblins in the very beginning, she could be communicating a universal message to all unmarried young women. Hence, *Goblin Market* is a captivating and layered poem which demands its audience to question societal rules, rather than to expect happiness upon fulfilling these conventions.

Works Cited

Rossetti, Christina. "Goblin Market." Norton Critical, vol. 2, 9th Edition., edited by Julia Reidhead, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2012. pp. 1496-1507

Davison, Carol Margaret. "The Victorian Gothic and Gender." *The Victorian Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, edited by Andrew Smith and William Hughes, Edinburgh University Press. 2012. Pp. 124-141, JSTOR. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt3fgt3w. 12.

Kooistra, Lorraine Janzen. "Modern Markets for Goblin Market." *Victorian Poetry*. Vol. 32, no. 3/4, 1994, pp. 249-277. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/4002818.

Vicinus, Martha. "Lesbian Perversity and Victorian Marriage: The 1864 Codrington Divorce Trial." *Journal of British Studies*. Vol. 36, no 1, 1997, pp. 70-98. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/175903.

Packer, Lona Mosk. "Symbol and Reality in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*." *PMLA*, vol. 73, no. 4, 1958, pp. 375-385. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1221111.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-satirical-marriage-proposal-in-goblin-market/>

org/stable/460256. Wood, Margaret. “ Marriage and Divorce 19thCentury Style”. Library of Congress. February 23rd, 2018. <https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2018/02/marriage-and-divorce-19th-century-style/>