

**‘Goblin Market’ - A Close Reading.**

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*“We must not look at goblin men,  
We must not buy their fruits:  
Who knows upon what soil they fed  
Their hungry thirsty roots?”*

(Rossetti 42-45)

'Goblin Market' by Christina Rossetti explores the commodification of sexuality and virtue, and acknowledges the societal acceptance of sexual violence against women. The poem describes a tale of two sisters who respond differently when faced with temptation. Whereas Laura falls victim to the allure of the goblins' forbidden fruits, Lizzie resists, representing the idealised moral woman. The value of women in society is shown to be perishable. Rossetti engages with this idea through an allegory of redemption. She addresses the notion of the fallen woman, by presenting her virtuous counterpart within a sexually ambiguous context. The relationship between men and women is explored by exaggerating gendered characteristics. Emphasis is placed on the aggression of the goblins, and qualities like patience and virtue in women. In this passage (ll. 408-446), Rossetti's use of colour, sound and repetition creates a synaesthetic experience that is shared by the reader and mirrors the narrative. Lizzie's silent resistance to the goblins' aggression is conveyed with admiration. Her refusal to succumb to temptation is praised. Nevertheless, the contrast between Lizzie's behaviour and the portrayal of violent, corrupting goblin men highlights a broader societal issue wherein women are commended for quietly enduring mistreatment, while the perpetrators are not held accountable.

Christina Rossetti's use of colour captures this predicament. In the first line of the passage, Lizzie is described as 'White and golden' (408). The colour white is broadly considered as a symbol of innocence. The syntactic structure of the line places 'White' in the forefront: 'White and golden Lizzie stood' (408). This conveys the idea that Lizzie's purity is the principal determinant of her value as a woman. The word 'golden' signifies the commodification of virtue. It suggests that her virginity is precious, in the same way that gold is precious in the marketplace. The use of white floral imagery accentuates the impression of Lizzie's innocence, she is 'Like a lily' (409), and a 'fruit-crown'd orange-tree / White with

blossoms honey-sweet' (415-416). She is compared to 'a rock of blue-vein'd stone / Lash'd by tides obstreperously' (410-411). The reader imagines her ossified into stillness, serene in the face of hostility. Beaten by the goblins, her bruises are compared to stains of black ink. Lizzie is 'pinch'd (...) black as ink' (427). The symbolic spread of ink across her skin is a disturbing image that demonstrates the severity of the abuse she silently bears to protect 'her standard' (421).

Sound plays an important role in the reader's understanding of the poem. Rossetti's use of consonance is a critical example of this. Lizzie is most closely linked to the repeated 'L' sound throughout the passage, while the goblins are connected to a harsh, 'ck' sound. This contrast is particularly powerful during the assault. In their attempt to compromise her virtue, the goblins try to force Lizzie to open her mouth to taste the fruit, but she resists. Despite being 'kick'd and knock'd' (428), Lizzie 'utter'd not a word; / Would not open lip from lip / Lest they should cram a mouthful in' (430-432). The reader, however, is compelled to participate. They must separate 'lip from lip' to recite the lines. Pronouncing the 'L' sound requires them to flick their tongue as if to taste the fruit. Tantalisingly close to consuming the juice of the forbidden fruit, Lizzie 'laugh'd in heart to feel the drip / Of juice that syrapp'd all her face' (434), simultaneously excited and violated. Lizzie's laughter can be considered a response to her sexual awakening, and to her success in outwitting the goblins' manipulation. She acquires the juice she needs to save her sister, without consuming the fruit herself, consequently keeping her virtue intact. Rossetti makes use of the imagery of fruit and juice, to consider sexually provocative and graphic images in a euphemistic manner. This is apparent in the description of the juice that 'streak'd her neck which quak'd like curd' (436). The onomatopoeic language like 'streak'd' and 'quak'd' elicits the uncomfortable sensation of syrupy juices congealing on skin. The use of consonance with the 'ck' sound in this string

of monosyllabic words creates a harsh staccato pace, emphasising the aggressive, systematic nature of the goblins' attack.

Christina Rossetti uses repetition and accumulation to reiterate the physical violence Lizzie endures. The goblins 'cuff'd and caught her, / Coax'd and fought her, / Bullied and besought her' (426), there are a total of six lines that list various attempts to make her capitulate. Each line ends with the word 'her', repeatedly affirming that the subject of the goblins' aggression is female. Lizzie's silent resistance to the goblins' efforts successfully maintains her status as a virtuous heroine. Nevertheless, 'Worn out by her resistance' (438) the goblin men were able to vanish without any consequence for their actions. 'Some writh'd' (442), 'Some div'd' (443) 'Some scudded' (445), but all disappeared. The use of anaphora towards the end of the passage indicates how numerous the goblins were, providing a sense of the magnitude of the force she had to overcome.

While 'Goblin Market' can be interpreted as a parable that commends women who guard their virtue at all costs, Rossetti also points to the absurdity of the treatment women are expected to endure to prove their integrity. In this passage, she constructs a narrative that is composed of several layers. Her use of visual, tactile, and auditory imagery creates a stimulating experience for the reader. She strategically uses colour, sound, and repetition to simulate the thematic concerns of the poem. Colour highlights the conflict between virtue and corrupting forces, sound and repetition emulate the physical aggression of the goblins, and create a sensorily immersive experience for the reader. The use of these techniques enables Rossetti to show how society praises purity, while exploring graphic sexuality. Acknowledging these coexisting, dichotomous interpretations allows the reader to appreciate the complexity of contemporary, and present day, sexual politics.

*Works cited:*

Rossetti, Christina. "Goblin Market." *Poems and Prose*, edited by Jan Marsh, Everyman, London, 1994, pp. 172–173.