

Christina Rossetti: Poems Summary and Analysis of "Goblin Market" (1862)

Summary:

Every evening, when sisters Lizzie and Laura go to fetch water from a nearby stream, they must listen to the tempting calls of goblin men selling delicious fruit. Lizzie fears the goblins and admonishes her sister to do the same. When they catch sight of the goblins displaying their wares on golden platters, Lizzie runs home, but Laura is entranced. Despite the goblins' demonic appearance, resembling cats, rats, snails and covered in whiskers, Laura hears only the coo of doves. The goblins see her and repeat their cry. Although Laura has no money, the goblins accept a lock of her hair as payment for the fruit. Laura drinks her fill of fruit juice and returns home, intoxicated by the sweet nectars. She brings one fruit stone (pit) home with her.

Lizzie meets Laura at the gateway to their home and scolds her sister for returning late. She recounts the tale of their friend Jeanie, who ate a piece of the goblin fruit and then pined away to her death because she could not get any more. Laura assures her sister that all is well and that she plans to buy enough fruit for both of them the next day. The sisters proceed with their housework. The next day, Laura discovers that she cannot see the goblins anymore nor hear their calls, although Lizzie still can. Laura pines for the fruit, losing her health and youthful vigor. After some futile attempts to plant the fruit pit, Laura despairs. She stops eating and working.

Lizzie fears that Laura will die soon, so she places a silver penny in her purse and goes to the goblin men. She asks for fruit for her sister, but the goblins instead invite Lizzie to join their feast. When she refuses, the goblins beat her and try to force the fruit into her mouth, smearing her face with juice. She does not succumb, and the goblins soon tire of torturing her.

Lizzie returns home and tells Laura to kiss the juice on her face, and Laura does so. The juice acts like a poison and Laura collapses into a deathlike state. Lizzie remains by her sister's side through the night and in the morning, Laura awakens, her health and beauty restored. Years later, when they are both married, the two sisters tell their children the tale of the goblin men. Laura ends the story with the moral, "there is no friend like a sister."

Analysis:

This narrative poem has an irregular rhyme scheme and loose iambic tetrameters, which quickens the pace. The loose meter allows for the narrators' spontaneity, and the rapid pace lends a tone of urgency. Lizzie and Laura, the narrators, deliver the poem as a lesson to their children.

There are two popular interpretations of "Goblin Market": one reading is religious, and the other focuses on gender and sexuality. Because it is difficult to prove Rossetti's original intent, scholars have invented a useful dichotomy. If the reader is more familiar with the religion, the reader will see the Christian allegory. However, if the reader is well versed in the study of gender and sexuality, then the symbolism will more readily relate to that topic. These interpretations are not mutually exclusive; rather, they should be viewed in tandem to extract the maximum meaning from this poem.

In the Christian interpretation, Laura represents Eve, the goblin men are the equivalent of Satan, their fruit is the temptation to sin, and Lizzie is the Christ figure. Laura sins by going against the interdiction that she must not eat the goblins' fruit, which is an homage to Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit in the Book of Genesis. The long list of the goblins' fruit represents the wide variety of temptations that humans face during their lifetimes. Like Adam and Eve, Laura discovers that the fruit does not bring fulfillment, but rather, death and destruction.

Meanwhile, Lizzie suffers the consequences of Laura's sin in order to rescue her sister from the punishment of death, just like Christ. The red fruit juice that Lizzie tries to get Laura to drink is like the blood of Christ in the Eucharist. Rossetti describes Lizzie as a pure "lily in a flood," and that is why she is the only person who is able to save Laura's life. The sacrifice Lizzie makes for her sister comes out of pure love and true friendship.

The second interpretation of "Goblin Market" is based on symbols of repressed sexual desire and sexual violence. Lizzie and Laura are both innocent and virginal at the beginning of the poem, but Laura's curiosity proves to be stronger than her sister's warning. Rossetti creates an uncomfortable struggle between the consequences of pursuing lust and the need to explore natural human desires. Amidst charged language like "sucked" and "heaved," Laura loses her youth and bloom (her virginity, essentially) as a result of taking the goblin men's tempting fruit. In Victorian society, a woman's deflowering marks her transition into adulthood as a wife and mother. However, because Laura is not married, the encounter strips her of her "maiden" status prematurely. Laura did not heed her sister's warning, and now, just like Jeanie, she will suffer.

Lizzie's trajectory in this interpretation, however, is not quite as straightforward. Rossetti uses the language of sexual violence when the goblin men attack her with fruit, but Lizzie refuses to drink the juice. Meanwhile, she manages to hold onto her virtue in the form of the silver penny, which has a double meaning - "silver penny" was an Elizabethan term for the female genitalia. Lizzie makes a sacrifice so that Laura can heal and recover. However, the difficulty of this interpretation is that lost maidenhood cannot be recovered. Instead, Laura's redemption could be refer to her reintroduction into normal social relationships, because at the end of the poem, she is married with children.

The motto, "there is no friend like a sister," coincides with the feminist theme. Sisterhood and female community were important to Rossetti, who worked with prostitutes at the St. Mary Magdalene Home for Fallen Women. Perhaps she hoped that through this poem, even fallen women could seek a path to redemption, leaving their past indiscretions behind. However, there is a darker side to the feminist interpretation. Much of the language in "Goblin Market" refers to buying and selling. In Victorian England, women were expected to follow a certain standard of conduct. Failure to meet these standards led to the depreciation of a woman's worth when she came to the marriage "market." Unlike Laura, Lizzie heeds the warning and safeguards her money in her purse, thereby protecting her maidenly virtue.