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Breaking the Rules: Hedonism and Sensuousness and a Lesson on *belle ideal* in Christina Rossetti's Poem *Goblin Market*

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Abstract:

Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* is an amatory and expressive poem appropriated for Victorian women with its sensual feelings and it brings female yielding out into the open. The poem captures Victorian ideals of womanhood dealing with the Victorian mentality which exerted a pressure against the freedom of women by means of creating an ideal which was archetypal. The poem is, as well, a feminized version of temptation, fall and redemption biting off the thread of the Bible. The two Rossettian sisters - Laura and Lizzie fall victim to the goblins' cry tasting the biblical forbidden fruit. The present paper accentuates how the poem depicts and deals with hedonism and sensuousness and how the maidens of the poem violate the moral code determined by Victorian ideology and Christian ethics through such gratifications. Thereby, this article also seeks how the poem, by and large, sheds light on a lesson on 'belle ideal'.

Keywords: *Christian, goblin fruit, hedonism, ideal, sensuousness, sin, Victorian, woman.*

Though limited, poems by Christina Rossetti (1830-94), an unknowable and reserved figure both in her poetry and private life, are perfumed with the female sensitivity and musicality. Rossetti's poem *Goblin Market*, originally titled *A Peep at The Goblins*, appeared in her first published volume *Goblin Market and Other Poems* in 1862 and is acknowledged as her masterpiece. The poem has a lot of levels of interpretations and has been interpreted differently at different times but culturally and allegorically it appears to be a moral tale being considered as a warning to women, as well as propounding them hope for redemption and vindication. Portrayal of the sinned girls and the redemptive nature constitute the narrative of the poem since Rossetti wrote the poem while working at the Mary Magdalene Penitentiary for Fallen Women. Violent Hunt observed the biographical connection behind the representation of the self-sacrificing sister to save another sister from dreadful event in the poem. It is read traditionally as dealing with the repressed female sexuality from the time when Kate Millet proposed a footnote that 'For some glimpses of female sexual fantasy, the reader is recommended to Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market"' (Trowbridge 114). Maureen

Duffy too focused on the perspective of eroticism for the poem. Such erotic and sumptuous diversions are drawn and destined to a lesson in Rossetti's *Goblin Market*.

The dichotomy of innocence and sexuality and sin and redemption develops through the poem's sub-textual presentation and through the portrayal of two sisters – Laura and Lizzie, one innocent and another experienced in judging the Goblins who symbolize Victorian patriarchy. *Goblin Market* begins with the goblin market, a kind of luxury, which offers a chain of sensuousness and erotic experiences to Laura and Lizzie, two heroines of the poem:

“Morning and evening
Maids heard the goblins cry:
“Come buy our orchard fruits,
Come buy, come buy:
Apples and quinces,
Lemons and oranges,
Plump unpecked cherries,
Melons and raspberries,
Bloom-down-cheeked peaches,
Swart-headed mulberries,
Wild free-born cranberries,
Crab-apples, dewberries,
Pine-apples, blackberries,
Apricots, strawberries;” Lines 1-14, *GM*.

The exciting fruits which open the poem – ‘Plump unpecked cherries’, ‘Bloom-down-cheeked peaches’, and ‘Wild free-born cranberries’ – evidently mention Lizzie and Laura's condition of erotic *naivete*. But, the fig, one of the goblin fruits that Laura feasts on, traditionally symbolizes the female sex and delicious corporality. The girls appear in the poem to undertake a journey from innocence to experience. The cry of the goblin men to ‘Come buy’, at the opening of the poem, resonates exactly resembling the call of the traders in any urban areas of Victorian England. Besides, the Christian motif of trading one's soul into proximity with the wedding arena of commercial dealings is indicated by that cry of goblins for the sale of their fruits.

Laura, a suppressed Victorian woman, in the guise of Adam committed a sin in the Eden like goblin market and is doomed for death. Laura's malady springing from her transgressive act of consumption implies the Edenic tree of life and Rossetti observes Laura's ‘tree of life drooped from the root’ (260). For her sinful act of consumption being secular, tacitly sexual, she is unable to yield devotional fruit. Laura's pursuit of pleasure escorted her in the danger of hedonism and she is engaged in a risky escapade. This is best described in the language of Mary Ellen Snodgrass:

“The poem progresses from a dizzying list of NATURE’s fruits for sale to Edenic disobedience and recompense for Laura’s sin of gorging herself on forbidden fruit.”
(Snodgrass 144)

Laura satiates herself with fruits paid to her in exchange of a lock of golden hair by the goblin men. She is captivated in the pleasure of the goblin fruits and returns to her residence in an ecstatic and stunning state. She ceases maintaining her domestic duty. Laura’s repeated surrendering to temptation is highlighted when she longed for a second taste wildly but this time she was not granted by the goblin merchants. The lack of goblin fruit is both trouble and tribulation to Laura who passionately yearns for it. She collapses into a corpse-like deterioration for want of one more flavor.

Goblin Market portrays hunger as an indicator of sensuality and sin, a signal of mankind’s fallen identity. It appropriates the Christian shift of good and evil and sin and salvation. Though Laura tasted a lot and ate her fill yet she complained to Lizzie that her ‘mouth waters still’. Laura’s tendency and ‘longing must be sexual’ as ‘it is the longing of an unmarried Victorian woman’ in terms of G. B. Tennyson’s attribution (Roe 6). In her strong desire for curios, Laura is existed as a frame bordering on the bizarrely bewitching:

“Laura stretched her gleaming neck
Like a rush-imbedded swan,
Like a lily from the beck,
Like a moonlit poplar branch,
Like a vessel at the launch
When its last restraint is gone.” Lines 81-86, *GM*.

The centrality of the poem resides in-between Laura and her yearning. She crosses the barrier in her hedonistic and sensuous venture. Having sampled goblin fruits, placed under a taboo, Laura manifests what, according to William Acton, is a kind of hallmark of an addicted performer of self-abuse: ‘The pale complexion, the emaciated form, the slouching gait, the clammy palm, the glassy or leaden eye, and the averted gaze, indicate the lunatic victim to this vice’(Trowbridge 121). Laura violated the Victorian dogma of being safeguarded within the domestic care and custody from the patriarchal world outside. Being tempted to the external dangers Laura breaks the rules of Victorian society as it credits home and domesticity as woman’s safe sphere. The poem registers the inescapable desire and dream of Laura reaching the end of a catastrophic innocence and facing the contented experience.

Sensual encounter is seen both in Laura and Lizzie emerging as the *belles* of the poem. While Laura is self-indulging in her pleasure pursuit Lizzie is depicted as self-sacrificing to save her sister from the goblins who appear like instruments of desire inducing the two

sisters. An alien existence being detrimental to the domestic existence, these goblins are treated as peripheral by these sisters' intuitiveness even prior to the goblin fruit thrust its toll:

“We must not look at goblin men,
We must not buy their fruits:
Who knows upon what soil they fed
Their hungry, thirsty roots?” Lines 42-45, *GM*.

Notwithstanding, the two sisters came into contact with those outside agents in varied ways, Lizzie pays a visit to the goblins and is invited through their 'sugar-baited words' to 'bite at' their peaches. The poem depicts the goblins who 'weave a crown / Of tendrils, leaves and rough nuts brown' (99-100) and ask Lizzie to 'take a seat with us Our feast is but beginning' (368-71). This feast wrecks the soul rather than safeguarding it from the death of sin, abandoning Laura 'dwindling ... knocking at Death's door' (320-21). While feeding Lizzie forcefully the goblins squeeze their fruits into her mouth. Her confrontation is treated with a sort of undertaken gang rape by the goblins who pounce on her and smear her with enchanted fruit juices though she 'Would not open lip from lip / Lest they should cram a mouthful in' (431-32). The fruit juices smeared all over Lizzie's body is a kind of eucharist for Laura's survival. This unsatisfied feast symbolizes the unpleasant repression of Victorian women by a sharp truth: women do not yielded to their hunger and hankering. Sensuality is forbidden as it besmirches one. The poem advocates the perils of hedonism and greets sisterly endearment. Lizzie, abused as 'proud, / cross-grained, uncivil' by the goblins, returns to Laura with her body dripping with juices and fruit-pulp and invites her:

“Come and kiss me.
Never mind my bruises,
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,” Lines 466-69, *GM*.

The climax comes when Lizzie says:

“Eat me, drink me, love me;
Laura, make much of me:” Lines 471-72, *GM*.

Rossetti not only restates the Biblical account but also reworks the story into a feminist commentary by way of gendering of her characters. Similar to the Biblical version of Christ's mortal sacrifice, Lizzie sacrifices her illogical attitudes approving of a close comprehension of sexuality. Lizzie's urging, which indicates an emotion that is very nearly incestuous, is more than Christ-like. Laura submissively 'Kissed and kissed and kissed' (486) Lizzie 'with a hungry mouth' (492) in a communion treat that paints an all-embracing female and paradoxically quasi-lesbian Christ. The poem is pervasive with sexual overtones and imagery. The sexual imagery inscribed in the repetition of the word *kissed* is perceptibly

amatory. Laura's retrieval from sin embraces Lizzie's self-sacrifice which is followed by the sensual and culminating encounter between the two sisters.

Lesbianism, a concept of female homosexuality through special feelings for each other, is highlighted when Lizzie pelts Laura with fruit to save her from goblins. Rossetti lays stress on the wages of sin by dint of figuring Lizzie as witch who is corrupted from within by the goblins at the end. Both of these sisters of *Goblin Market*, thus, go through the sensuous delight and evade the Victorian decency of femininity. Rossetti concludes the misadventure:

“Life out of death.
That night long Lizzie watched by her,
Counted her pulse's flagging stir,
Felt for her breath,
Held water to her lips, and cooled her face
With tears and fanning leaves:” Lines 524-29, *GM*.

Germaine Greer distinguishes '*Goblin Market* and the poems leading up to it' as specially pivotal to feminist readers while regarding Rossetti 'incorrigibly minor' as a 'religious poet' chiefly because 'she used the aspiration of piety as a metaphor for her own frustrated sexuality' (Roe 5). Victorian protocol curbed her bewailing instinct for unrestrained self-utterance. The poem offered Rossetti an alternative way of liberating herself from this restraint, though this liberation is a passing beyond the limit of Victorian and Christian canon.

Both in its anthropoid and scriptural sense, temptation is the thematic hub of *Goblin Market* and the poem censures gratifying passion. In Christina Rossetti's verse, the lure has been sketched convincingly like that of D G Rossetti and A C Swinburne. She has a tribute to *Eros* like pagan German romanticism. The subject of the poem being the problem of temptation treats one of the moral problems which is voiced by William Michael Rossetti:

“-- that to succumb to temptation makes one a victim to that same continuous temptation; that the remedy does not always lie with oneself; and that a stronger and more righteous will may prove of avail to restore one's lost estate.” (Mahalik 60)

The sin and temptation symbolized by the fruit in the Bible has been revised in the poem *Goblin Market* via goblin fruit. Like the forbidden fruit of Scriptures, the fruits of goblin market sold by the goblin merchants bring decay and death to Laura and Lizzie. Their acceptance of the goblin fruits resembles Eve's acceptance of the apple from the Satan. This undertaking is held suggestive of their unscrupulousness. They carried on with the sin, the sin of Eve, when they bowed to men rather than to God. They are tricked by the Goblins in the same way as Adam and Eve were by the Satan. Through this, their path led downward in a hurry and reckless way. Laura questioned Lizzie if she has tasted 'the fruit forbidden' (479)

for her sake. The lure of love is essentially represented by the traditional symbol of fruit in *Goblin Market*. The lustful feasting on the fruit runs throughout the poem and the sensuous joys of love are narrated thus:

“Sweeter than honey from the rock,
Stronger than man-rejoicing wine,
Clearer than water flowed that juice;
She never tasted such before,
How should it cloy with length of use?
She sucked and sucked and sucked the more
Fruits which that unknown orchard bore;
She sucked until her lips were sore;” Lines 129-36, *GM*.

The sensation of taste is granted less repute in the Victorian ideology of austerity. The poem is represented like an ideology of non-consumption. This ‘culture of anorexia’ endowed the entire Victorian age with phantasm that denial of bodily raptures has an austere and rational standard. Thereby rejection of such anti-Victorian proliferation of food is emphasized in *Goblin Market* to a large extent and highlight Victorian values of female decorum.

The poem *Goblin Market* was composed (1859) and published (1862) in the Victorian era which was characterized as a domestic age par excellence. The age was embodied by Queen Victoria, who came to entitle a kind of femininity which was centered on the family, motherhood, and respectability. She came to be identified as the exact stereotype of matrimonial solidity and domestic dignity. During her reign, a woman was placed in the home, as the domesticity was regarded by society at large to be an adequate psychic and emotive fulfillment for females.

According to Victorian ideals, “true women” manifested righteousness, passivity and congenial religiosity. Merged with her exquisite feebleness a woman’s unique morality grants her for her role as wife and mother, positioning her at the center of the Victorian family – which, in succession, served as the foundation of Victorian society. Her dignity being protected from the vices of public realms she engaged in the private realms of the home where she could create a blissful household. She exercised her influence for her husband and sons in being godly man and good citizens. Indeed, she should have pleasures in marital life but not in pre-marital life as an isolated one. Laura and Jeanie are such isolated ones in Rossetti’s poem *Goblin Market*. And the ruin of the isolated individual in search of happiness is voiced like a lesson through Lizzie when she considers her dead friend Jeanie:

“Who should have been a bride;
But who for joys brides hope to have
Fell sick and died

In her gay prime,”

Lines 313-16, *GM*.

During the Victorian period, whose ‘primary virtues (of) independence, health, success required constant control over one’s body and physical energies’, initiatives against the untimely ageing were the avoidance of utmost sensation or physical activity. Hence, an excessively active erotic life in juvenile is depicted as ‘responsible for premature illness’ in Christina Rossetti’s poem where Laura’s ‘hair grew thin and gray,’ and she ‘turn(s)/ To swift decay’ and she has ‘sunk eyes and faded mouth’. For her voracious longing for the fruit she has become distorted and freakish. She suffers the loss of all her inclination to the domiciliary world of the sisters and begins to ‘dwindle’, much like Jeanie, now dead from having gorging herself on goblin fruits. The basic purpose in the poem is the non-acceptance of physical advances and uncontrollable mobility. In this regard, Lysack, reflecting on the delight of such perceived clientele extravaganzas, comments that the poem ‘affirms female desire within (...) a marketplace’ (Trowbridge 121).

Innocence for the Victorian girls was determined by their state of being pure at least until marriage. Such Victorian image of purity is marred at the beginning of the poem *Goblin Market*. Instead of spirituality, Laura and Lizzie succumbed to sensuous activities. James Kincaid commented in his *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (1992):

“‘the child’ was invented in the eighteenth century to occupy an empty psychic and social space..” (Aikens 106)

This empty space was filled by the empty physique of the child to the same extent. This physique is described and determined by ‘a kind of purity, an absence, and an incapacity, an inability to do’(Aikens 106). But the girls in *Goblin Market* stray from their familial boundary and behave badly traversing through the world of hedonism and sensuousness. Their addiction of drug-like goblin fruits complicates the Victorian ideals about marriage, motherhood and childhood. They defy the typical standards for Victorian heroines in their own way. It is brought to light by Leder who proposes that “Goblin Market” –

“expresses one of the nineteenth century’s most vivid nightmares of female violation in the marketplace and one of the most brazen fantasies of the redemptive powers and pleasures of sisterly love. (It) reveals Rossetti’s sharp and modern insight into women’s dual role in the marketplace as both objects and perpetually unfulfilled consumers.” (Trowbridge 115)

After a sybaritic journey across ‘the pleasant weather’ of the ‘glen’, Laura, at last, became a part of the patriarchy’s domestic sphere by means of motherhood telling cautionary tales to the children. The heroines of the poem - Laura and Lizzie, now married, recount the story from their bygone days and teach their own children the ideological essence of the assumed

welfare and assured future. Mothers alert their little ones against the cursed 'glen' and the mischievous goblins and their forbidden fruits. Closing of the poem is a solemn ceremony of establishing mortal vow to get rid of the forces of evil:

“Then joining hands to little hands
Would bid them cling together,
“For there is no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather;
To cheer one on the tedious way,
To fetch one if one goes astray,
To lift one if one totters down,
To strengthen whilst one stands.”” Lines 560-67, *GM*.

Rossetti's individual requirement is thus contemplated to suppress 'sexual temptation for the strictly religious life' in *Goblin Market* and her cornerstone is on the lawful consumption denying sensual pleasure and it lays down an exemplar of a lesson. Goblins are no longer a peril to the private and woman-centered world the poem sets forth. Winterston viewed the poem as a cautionary tale about the temptation of rejecting oneself and divulged the repression of patriarchal society in the Victorian era. The far-reaching proposal and plan Rossetti's poem models are that Laura and other fallen women might be altogether redeemable from the sin. Decorating the poem with a recurring design of the Biblical Fall - temptation, fall, redemption, and restoration Rossetti voices the Christian notion of guilt – an awareness from wrongdoing. The theme of human tendency of breaking some rules from time to time and preservation and salvation through it as a necessary experience are reconstructed in the poem. The poem *Goblin Market*, by all means, explores maidens' inclination toward frenzied fancy and ends with a moralizing denouement, a lesson on *belle ideal* which is, at first, left in ruins through hedonism and sensuousness but is restored later without overstepping the rules of Victorian morality and Christian ethics.

Abbreviation:

GM - Goblin Market

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