

Vampires in the Closet: Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*

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¹Christina Rossetti was born on the 5th of December, 1830 at 38 Charlotte Street, London. She was the sister of poet and illustrator, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and the niece of John William Polidori, author of *The Vampyre*. Christina's most famous work is the narrative poem, *Goblin Market*, written in 1859 and later published. As David F. Morrill writes in his ²critical paper of 1990, critics "casually dismissed *Goblin Market* as a mere fairy story, devoid of "any profound or ulterior meaning". They seemingly failed to recognise the interwoven subtext, perhaps as a result of willful ignorance and ego. How we understand the themes behind this poem is by looking into Rossetti's life.

³She was heavily involved in the Oxford movement, attending daily devotionals at Christ Church, Albany Street. This is particularly prevalent in the line:

"We must not look at goblin men / We must not buy their fruits... "

Looking at the story of Adam and Eve, it is never specifically stated that the forbidden fruit is an apple. ⁴Bodie Hodge theorises:

*"The confusion of this fruit with the apple may be due to the similarity of the two words in the Latin translation of the Bible, known as the Vulgate. The word *evil* in the tree's name in Latin is *mali* (Genesis 2:17). The word *apple* in other places is *mala* (Proverbs 25:11) or *malum* (Song of Solomon 2:3). It seems like this similarity may have led to the confusion. In the original Hebrew, the words are*

¹ Duguid, Lindsay. "Rossetti, Christina Georgina". Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 8th January 2009, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/display/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-24139>.

² Morrill, David F. "Twilight Is Not Good for Maidens": Uncle Polidori and the Psychodynamics of Vampirism in 'Goblin Market.' *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1990, pp. 1-16. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40002037>. Accessed 30 Aug. 2024.

³ D'Amico, Diane and David A. Kent. "Rossetti and the Tractarians." *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 44 no. 1, 2006, p. 93-103. *Project MUSE*, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/vp.2006.0011>.

⁴ Hodge, Bodie. "Was the Forbidden Fruit an Apple?". *Answers In Genesis*, April 1st 2017, <https://answersingenesis.org/adam-and-eve/was-the-forbidden-fruit-an-apple/>.

not even close. The word in Genesis 2:17 for evil is rah, while the word for apples in Proverbs 25:11 and Song of Solomon 2:3 is tappuwach.”

While this speculation exists, we can be sure that for Rossetti, the forbidden fruit *was* an apple, and there are plenty of them in *Goblin Market*. But what do they represent? The poem follows two sisters, Laura and Lizzie, as they are tempted by the goblins at the market. Most believe the goblins to be stand-ins for men looking to ‘corrupt’ these Anglo-Catholic girls (if we are to assume Lizzie and Laura as Christina and Maria [who *Goblin Market* is dedicated to]). However, as ⁵David F. Morrill writes:

“The goblins in Rossetti’s poem are hardly the sprightly, mischievous [sic] elves of folklore who skim the cream off milk, blow out candles, and box the seats of young men. They are darker, more mysterious, more powerful, more terrifying, and more human.”

John William Polidori, writer of *The Vampyre*, was Rossetti’s uncle. In the modern era, we know vampires as alluring and full of mystery: think of Lestat de Lioncourt from *Interview With the Vampire*. However, the original belief heralded them as these vicious creatures to be feared. Later in the poem, Rossetti details what we might know as love bites, “Never mind my bruises / Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices,” but an alternative reading is to see the bruises as marks of the vampire. All the talk of sucking further alludes to something vampiric. As she writes, “Twilight is not good for maidens; / Should not loiter in the glen,” continuing to stretch the image of the undead.

The subject of hunger is especially prevalent in *Goblin Market*, as noted by ⁶Deborah Ann Thompson:

“...this was an age when food refusal in young women first came to medical attention and was categorized as the neurotic disorder anorexia nervosa.”

Critics argue among themselves about the dual meanings of refusing to eat, with some saying it represents a deprived creativity, and others

⁵ MORRILL, DAVID F. “‘Twilight Is Not Good for Maidens’: Uncle Polidori and the Psychodynamics of Vampirism in ‘Goblin Market.’” *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1990, pp. 1–16. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40002037>. Accessed 30 Aug. 2024.

⁶ THOMPSON, DEBORAH ANN. “Anorexia as a Lived Trope: Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market.’” *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, vol. 24, no. 3/4, 1991, pp. 89–106. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24780467>. Accessed 30 Aug. 2024.

lamenting the rise in eating disorders. In my opinion, this argument doesn't hold enough weight. It is my view that Laura and Lizzie are hungry for new experiences and each other. While it is never definitively asserted, I am of the opinion that the sisters are girls rather than women. Rossetti was almost thirty-years old when she wrote *Goblin Market*, and a few years prior to this, she suffered a breakdown.⁷ Christina had a crisis of faith and was utterly convinced she would bring shame to her family.

At a pivotal point in the poem, Lizzie says, "Eat me, drink me, love me," which is further evidence of potential incestuous feelings between the sisters. In 1857, Rossetti was in a brief relationship with John Brett. As per her poem—*No, Thank You, John*—it appears that Rossetti could not fulfil his desires:

"I have no heart?—Perhaps I have not; / But then you're mad to take offence / That I don't give you what I have not got / Use your common sense."

Could this be a partial reason for the poem? Might Rossetti have been wondering what her life would have been had she denounced men in favour of women? I believe there is a possibility. After the main events, the sisters go on to live the rest of their lives, telling their children about what happened. Laura speaks of "...Those pleasant days long gone," thus indicating that she is not happy with traditional life. This then brings into question how happy Rossetti was living an Anglo-Catholic life. We already know she had a crisis of faith mere years prior, so it is not much of a stretch to infer the questioning of religious ideals from *Goblin Market*.

Other meanings can be given by the use of Rossetti's poem in other types of media. *Goblin Market* is quoted in a 2008 episode of *Doctor Who* called 'Midnight'. Having been unable to drag his companion from the comfort of a spa bathed in lethal radiation, the Doctor joins passengers on a shuttle to a waterfall made from sapphires. Everything seems to be going well, but when the cockpit is destroyed, the Doctor and his new friends are terrorised by an unseen creature. Sky Silvestry becomes host to this invisible fiend, repeating everything the other passengers say. At one point, fellow passenger Dee Dee quotes three famous lines from Rossetti's poem:

⁷ Stockford, Jennifer. "Rossetti, Christina". ZigZag Education, n.d, <https://zigzageducation.co.uk/biography/timeline/rossetti#:~:text=John%20Brett%20was%20a%20brief,with%20her%20love%20for%20God.>

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

These lines are spoken by Laura as the sisters desperately try to resist the goblin men. While Sky is eventually vacuumed out of the shuttle, what is most fascinating about this episode is the little details. At the beginning, the Doctor wanted Donna to come, but she was unwilling to leave her comfort. I believe this to be an allegory of the duality of man, as evidenced by Rossetti's frequent usage of pairs in *Goblin Market*; many things are in twos. If we combine the Doctor and Donna as two halves of the same person, the Doctor is the part who experiments. Her other half is Donna, the woman who wants to stay where she is familiar. It is important to understand that prior to this episode, Donna had witnessed things that made her question life with the Doctor. With this context in mind, we can see clear parallels between *Midnight* and *Goblin Market*. And because of this, one might conclude that Christina Rossetti was torn between what her religion believed and what she truly wanted.

In Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Elsie Norris reads from *Goblin Market* to Jeanette in the hospital:

“When I was sad she read me Goblin Market by a woman called Christina Rossetti, whose friend once gave her a pickled mouse in a jar, for a present.”

Winterson's novel explores a young lesbian who is also an Evangelist, which is not too far from Rossetti's experience. Clearly, Winterson also sees the themes of sexuality in *Goblin Market*, and uses that to elevate her story. Not only does this back up my argument, but it pulls in the other explorations of religion and vampirism. Perhaps what is truly vampiric is having to hide who you are? That will drain the life out of anyone, particularly during the Victorian era. With this in mind, we should take a sledgehammer to the poem.

Laura is the one to be taken by the goblin men, thus we can make the connection to Rossetti herself. If we look at the poem through the lens of her life, it would seem that her sexual feelings began as she approached puberty, and the older Rossetti who wrote it is reflecting on what her life could have been if she stayed true to herself. This could be why she was unable to give John Brett what he needed, as mentioned previously.

Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* has soared through the hearts of many in the last century. To this day we are still debating the various

interpretations of this poem, much to the contrary of the ⁸bad-faith critics of the time. Though I believe the strongest one is that the poem alludes to Rossetti's sexuality. There are numerous lines pointing to the possibility; from "Eat me, drink me, love me," to "She kiss'd and kiss'd her with a hungry mouth". While David F. Morrill spoke of vampires as beasts similar to her uncle's famous work, I believe it is a metaphor for a closeted woman looking for permission to explore, but so afraid of what might happen that she never takes the chance.

Exploration was frowned upon in Rossetti's time, and I cannot begin to imagine what it's like to live a lie, but she adeptly weaves these themes into a garishly gothic narrative full of fruits, goblins, and death. Ultimately, *Goblin Market* is a cultural critique on Victorian society and the church, detailing how it kept women away from their true form, disguised as a fairytale.

⁸ Haines, Connor. "Opinions of "Goblin Market" Directly after its Release". Nineteenth-Century Research Seminar, July 15th 2019, <https://blogs.baylor.edu/19crs/2019/07/15/opinions-of-goblin-market-directly-after-its-release/>