

Goblin Market - Christina Rossetti (Analysis)

Symbolism, Imagery & Wordplay

Fruit

This is an obvious one image for "Goblin Market." After all, the poem is about eating fruit and then wanting for more. The poem opens with a list of 29 different kinds of fruit (yes, we counted). What are you supposed to do with that kind of variety? The level of detail in the poem is often overwhelming, and it's hard to take in all at once. So what's all the fruit doing in the poem? Is it just about temptation? Or does it do something else? That's part of the fun of the poem - it keeps you guessing.

- Lines 9: The goblins use a metaphor to describe the fuzz on their fresh peaches that makes the peaches seem like human faces, with "cheeks."
- Lines 43-45: In these lines, Laura talks about the "hungry thirsty roots" of the fruit trees feeding on some unknown soil.
- Line 406-407: Here, the intense imagery of the goblins trying to force-feed their fruits to Lizzie underscores the violence of the scene.
- Lines 415-417: Lizzie is compared to an "orange-tree" being pollinated by "wasp and bee[s]" through an elaborate-simile. Does this sound kind of sexual to you? It is probably supposed to.

Sisterhood

For the first hundred years after it was written, "Goblin Market" was read almost exclusively as a children's poem about the importance of sisterhood and sisterly heroism. In fact, you can still find greeting cards with the final lines of "Goblin Market" written in them. Just check out the "sister" section of a rack of birthday cards, and you might find one. But what's going on with these two sisters? All of the similes suggest that the two of them are virtually interchangeable, and yet one of them succumbs to the temptation of the goblin fruit, while the other stands firm.

- Lines 184-186: This simile compares the two sleeping sisters to a pair of "pigeons in one nest."
- Line 188: Laura and Lizzie are compared to "two blossoms on one stem" in this simile. Are they twins?
- Lines 562-567: Laura gets the final word because she's the one who provides the moral of the story, and it's about the importance of sisters. These final lines of the poem use anaphora, or the repetition of the same basic structure over and over, to form of a list. Laura is listing all the ways that sisters are awesome.

Flowers

Flowers in "Goblin Market" tend to be associated with delicate, fragile purity, as opposed to the luscious, decadent, and sensual goblin fruit. Flowers, though, can be "plucked," which often represented a loss of purity (line 151).

- Line 83: This simile compares Laura to a lily by the edge of a "beck," or stream. Lilies often symbolize purity in western culture, but they are also sometimes associated with death.
- Line 120: Laura connects the golden flowers on the "furze" with golden coins, or money, through metaphor.
- Lines 150-151: Poor, misguided Jeanie – she ate the goblin fruit and even wore the "flowers" they'd picked for her. There's a possible pun on the word "bower" here: a "bower" is a shady part of a garden, but it's also used to describe a lady's private dressing room. So a "flower" that was "plucked" from a "bower" could very well suggest the loss of virginity.
- Line 409: This simile compares Lizzie to a lily, and the alliteration, or repeated "L" sounds in these lines really underscores the connection between Lizzie and a lily.
- Lines 533-534: In these lines, the description of the "new buds" and "cup-like lilies" relate metaphorically to Laura's new freshness and health.

Money

Of course "money" has to be important in a poem with "market" in the title. But even though the market is central to the basic plot of the poem, money only changes hands twice. And the first time, it's not even real money – it's a lock of hair. So what's that about?

- Line 120: Laura is the first to talk about money metaphorically. In this line, she says that the only "gold" she has is the golden flowers that grow on the "furze" (a prickly kind of shrub with yellow flowers).
- Line 123: The goblins immediately pick up on Laura's use of metaphor, and point out that if the "gold" on the "furze" counts, why not the "gold" on her "head."
- Line 126: Laura makes her metaphor relating gold coins to golden hair literal when she actually snips off a "golden curl" to use as money.
- Line 127: Even Laura's "tear" related to something of monetary value (a "pearl"). It's as though her whole body is getting turned into something that can be exchanged, bought, or sold, just through the poem's metaphors.

The Moon

The moon is often symbolically connected to women in poetry. But, it can also have to do with cycles and changes, since the moon changes shape throughout the month. The moon makes a couple of appearances in "Goblin Market," and always seems to be connected with addiction to the goblin fruit.

- Line 84: In this simile, Laura is compared to a "moonlit poplar branch." A poplar is a kind of delicate, flowering tree – appropriate for Laura, who is in the "blossom" of her youth.
- Line 148: Lizzie reminds Laura about the girl, Jeanie, who had eaten the goblin fruit and died. She "met them in the moonlight," so the temptation to eat goblin fruit is again associated with "moonlight." Is the market not open when there's no moon?
- Line 246: Again, the "moon" is associated with the danger of temptation. Lizzie hears the goblins call, and the movement of the moon in the sky warns her that she should get inside.
- Lines 278-280: After having eaten the goblin fruit in the moonlight, Laura's life seems somehow bound up with the moon: she starts to "dwindle" as the moon wanes from full.

Water

A lot of the action of "Goblin Market" takes place down by the stream where Laura and Lizzie gather water. Most of the detail in "Goblin Market" means something. What about the water and all the images associated with water? Give us your ideas!

- Lines 85-86: In this simile, Laura is compared to a ship whose anchor is up and lines are cast –nothing is holding it back anymore. So in this image, water is associated with being unrestrained and free (possibly not in a good way).
- Line 219: After Laura has eaten the fruit, she and Lizzie go to draw water from the stream as usual. The "gurgling" of the stream appeals to the sense of the reader. Instead of only visual imagery, here, we're given auditory detail.
- Lines 289-292: This simile compares Laura's fantasies about goblin melons to the mirages of water that travelers might see in the desert.

Rhyme, Form & Meter

Irregular

The meter and rhyme scheme are irregular in "Goblin Market." The poem generally follows an ABAB rhyme scheme, but not always. In fact, sometimes there's a long gap between a word and its rhyme, and sometimes there are many lines in a row with the same rhyming syllable at the end (like lines 134-136).

Why does it change so often? Why are some lines so much longer than others? What's the effect of reading several lines in a row that rhyme, while earlier bits were in a different pattern? These are all good questions to think about as you read the poem, because the answers will be different for different readers.

Speaker/Point of View

There is no first-person narrator in "Goblin Market" like in many other poems. There's no "I." Instead, there's an *omniscient third-person narrator* like you'd find in most novels or short stories. A third-person narrator usually gives the impression of being more distant from the story than a first-person narrator would because a third-person narrator isn't a character and doesn't participate in the plot. The narrator of "Goblin Market" is no exception. She seems to describe the "Goblin Market" objectively, at least at first. She lists all the goblin fruits for sale and doesn't make any judgments about whether they're good or not. The speaker leaves it to Laura and Lizzie to judge for the reader.

Occasionally, as the poem goes on, the narrator will slip in an adjective that suggests that she's not as objective. For example, she describes Lizzie's advice to Laura as "wise" (142) and Laura's silence as "sullen" (271). And finally, towards the end of the poem, the narrator actually breaks out and addresses Laura directly:

*Ah fool, to choose such part
Of soul-consuming care!* (lines 511-512)

The narrator calls Laura a "fool" for "choos[ing]" to eat the goblin fruit, even though it meant giving in to "soul-consuming care." The narrator's objectivity seems to go out the window in these lines, which mark the climax of the poem. It's as though the narrator just couldn't keep her mouth shut during the exciting part – she had to throw in her two cents.

Setting

"Goblin Market" seems to take place in some kind of fantasy parallel universe with several important differences from our own world. First of all, there are goblins, and they have a traveling fruit market. (Don't buy the fruit, though, because you'll get hooked on it, and then you'll waste away and die.) Second, there are no men – seriously. Laura and Lizzie live by themselves, and even at the end of the poem, we learn that they have become "wives/ With children of their own" (lines 544-545), but we never see or hear of their husbands.

Other than the fruit-peddling goblins and the distinct lack of human men, though, the world of "Goblin Market" looks an awful lot like an idyllic English countryside. There are lots of fresh flowers, cows to milk, chickens to feed, babbling brooks and meadows... not a bad place to hang out, if you like bucolic scenery. Again, though, take it from us: *don't eat the fruit*.

Sound

Christina Rossetti always insisted that "Goblin Market" was a children's poem, and it definitely sounds like one. The short lines, vivid imagery, and frequent repetitions and lists make it sound sing-song-y, like a child's nursery song. Parts of it seem so catchy they should be used in TV ads:

*Morning and evening
Maids heard the goblins cry:
'Come buy our orchard fruits,
Come buy, come buy.'* (lines 1-4)

The rhythm and the rhyme seem so deceptively simple that you could imagine toddlers reciting these lines and bobbing their little heads in time to the rhythm of the words. The repetition of the goblins' cry, "Come buy! Come buy!" sounds like a chorus, or refrain - very much like in a children's song. But then you get to lines like this:

*She sucked and sucked and sucked the more
Fruits which that unknown orchard bore'
She sucked until her lips were sore.* (lines 134-136)

It's harder to imagine preschoolers reading this part, right? "Goblin Market" is like an unrated foreign movie that *looks* family-friendly, until all of a sudden the parents have to clap their hands over their kids' eyes. Even the sound of "Goblin Market" keeps the reader guessing.

Title

The title of our poem is self-explanatory: "Goblin Market." It's about the fruit market run by goblins. It doesn't seem too tricky ... or is it? Like the poem itself, the title "Goblin Market" is deceptively simple: it seems straightforward, but there's a lot more going on under the surface.

The title tells the reader that markets are going to be important in the poem, but what kind of market? What do goblins sell, and why would they run a market? Is this a poem about capitalist merchant economies in general, or about a literal market where people can buy and sell stuff? Or is it about the Victorian "marriage market," which is how people referred to the underhanded manipulations many men and women went through to marry into rich families and move up in society? What is a "Goblin Market," anyway? From the title, it sounds like it's a fairy tale or fantasy, or maybe something for kids. But as you know by the end of the poem, it's more complicated than that. Like we said: deceptively simple.

Style

Like all members of the Pre-Raphaelite movement of poets and artists, Christina Rossetti was interested in providing the nitty-gritty detail of everything she described. "Goblin Market" is overflowing with detail, from the shape and texture of each individual fruit, to the appearance and habits of each individual goblin. All that detail, both in "Goblin Market" and in other Pre-Raphaelite art, can occasionally be overwhelming. After all, how do you tell what's most important if everything is described with equal detail?

Language

The language is relatively easy (aside from the occasional unfamiliar fruit or animal), and the basic story of the poem isn't too hard to get our heads around. But you could spend your whole life trying to unravel all the possible layers of metaphor and allegory. (Trust us, people have done just this.) This tension is one of the reasons this poem is still so popular today – it's great for beginning readers, but it's still got a lot to offer more experienced readers, too.

Most of the sexy stuff in "Goblin Market" is implied, rather than explicitly described. There are some lines that are almost ludicrously erotic – they're so over-the-top that it's hard not to laugh as you read them. Yet Christina Rossetti insisted her whole life that it was a children's poem.

References

The Bible, Genesis 1: the whole "forbidden fruit" plot in "Goblin Market" is often read as an allusion to Adam and Eve's eating of the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in Eden in Genesis, the first book of the Judeo-Christian scriptures. Alexander Pope, "The Rape of the Lock ": some critics and readers think that the scene in which Laura trades a lock of her hair for the goblin fruit is a shout-out to Alexander Pope's "The Rape of the Lock" (1712-14) in which a guy snips a lock of hair from the head of his would-be girlfriend without her permission.

Facts about the Poet

- Christina Rossetti often served as a model for her brother, Dante Gabriel's paintings and sketches.
- Christina Rossetti was deeply religious, and broke off at least two marriage engagements because of religious differences.
- Christina Rossetti was good friends with Lewis Carroll, the author of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.