



Rewriting the Fallen Woman Narrative: Caution, Sisterhood, and Future Possibilities in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*

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Abstract

Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" engages with Victorian anxieties surrounding female sexuality, consumption, and moral transgression through the figure of the "fallen woman." While it initially adopts the structure of a cautionary tale, particularly through Laura's temptation and Jeanie's fate, it ultimately challenges the binary between purity and fallenness that shaped nineteenth-century representations of women. Rather than allowing transgression to result in permanent condemnation, Rossetti reimagines redemption through sisterhood. Lizzie's self-sacrificial intervention enables Laura's physical and moral restoration, reconceptualising redemption as a collective rather than individual process. Jeanie's isolation from female solidarity further highlights the consequences of exclusion within a patriarchal economy of desire. By juxtaposing caution with recuperation, the poem critiques structures of patriarchal exploitation and rewrites the Victorian fallen woman narrative, envisioning an alternative future in which female solidarity enables survival, resistance, and renewal across generations.

Keywords

Christina Rossetti, patriarchy, Victorian morality, fallen woman, sisterhood, caution, redemption, care, future

Introduction

Published in 1862, Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" engages with themes of capitalism, consumerism, patriarchal exploitation, and sexuality, with sisterhood emerging as its central concern. In fact, the year the poem was published was also the year Rossetti was working at St. Mary Magdalene Penitentiary at Highgate, where Anglican sisters and volunteers like Rossetti worked to help "fallen women." The concept of sisterhood is also used in the sense of the late nineteenth-century association with a religious order of nurses, suggesting that nursing and nurturing, rather than being a secondary function, embody heroism of its own. In this Rossetti was influenced by Florence Nightingale, whose service in the Crimean war made her a heroine.

The poem narrates the story of two sisters, Laura and Lizzie, who are warned to beware of the goblins and their fruits, which function as covert references to sexual temptation and desire. While Lizzie can resist the temptation, Laura enters the male-dominated marketplace without any money, hence metaphorically paying with her "precious golden lock" for the delicious fruits (Rossetti 126). Interestingly, Rossetti's treatment of Laura after she has supposedly gone astray is the most radical part of the poem. While Victorian norms viewed women as either angelic or fallen ones, the poem denies such problematic labelling, inviting the readers to move away from regressive codes of Victorian morality. This paper argues that while *Goblin Market* initially adopts the form of a cautionary tale, Rossetti ultimately rewrites the Victorian fallen woman narrative through the transformative power of sisterhood, opening up new possibilities for female redemption, agency, and future belonging.

The Fallen Woman Tradition in Victorian Literature

Nineteenth-century writers often depicted the predicament of fallen women, who had had sexual relationships before or outside the institution of marriage. This Victorian obsession with women's sexuality and chastity is visible in many classic novels such as *Jane Eyre*, *The Mill on the*

Floss, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, to name a few. In fact, the Victorian idea of “the angel in the house” emerges from Coventry Patmore’s poem of the same title that establishes patriarchal expectations for women to be “amiable and innocent” and take “pleasure in (their) power to charm.” (Patmore 41) The image of the “angel in the house” stands in sharp contrast to that of a fallen woman and depicts the nineteenth-century norm of viewing women in binary opposites, with an obsession with asserting control over their sexuality. Even a novelist as radical as Thomas Hardy could not provide redemption to one of his most tragic heroines, Tess after her fall, despite his awareness of the hypocrisy underlying Victorian moral codes. However, Christina Rossetti’s poem “Goblin Market”, interestingly, while being a cautionary tale, also provides scope for redemption. The poem offers no prominent demarcation between the two sisters. In fact, the only characteristic distinguishing Lizzie from Laura is her self-denying nature and ability to repress her innate desire, which, in a way, also preserves her. By blurring the boundary between virtue and transgression, Rossetti challenges the binary opposition between the “angel in the house” and the “fallen woman” that dominated Victorian thought.

Caution and Female Vulnerability in “Goblin Market”

Rossetti in the poem deals with the anxiety about sexuality and mobility of women who, despite being allowed to step out of the domestic sphere and work for a living, still became commodities in the patriarchal system controlled by men. Critics have noted that Jeanie’s character has been adopted from Daniel Gabriel Rossetti’s poem, “Jenny.” Despite acknowledging the double standards of a society that both exploits and ostracises the prostitute Jenny, the poem merely pities her without granting her any redemption.

In the highly patriarchal Victorian world, Jeanie’s story serves as a warning to Laura and Lizzie against succumbing to the temptations of the goblin men. The first reference to Jeanie’s ill-fate comes right after Laura has tasted the fruits offered by the beast-like goblin men. Lizzie, “full of wise upbraidings,” reminds Laura of the repercussions Jeanie had to face as a result of her actions (Rossetti

142). Not only did she “pined and pined away,” but she also “found them (goblins) no more but dwindled and grew grey.” (Rossetti 154-156) The fact that not even grass grew on Jeanie’s grave, let alone the daisies Lizzie planted there, suggests a symbolic sterility resulting from Jeanie’s sexual transgression of Victorian propriety. Elizabeth Campbell notes that Jeanie has given up the most distinctive feature of her female sexuality, that is, her reproductive ability to bear fruit (Campbell 406). Hence, Jeanie pays the price by losing personal fulfilment, desirability, and social acceptance within the institution of marriage.

Jeanie’s story serves as a cautionary narrative that highlights female vulnerability in the face of an exploitative patriarchal society. However, to read Jeanie merely in cautionary terms without recognising her sacrifice risks misreading her role in the poem. Laura’s eventual redemption, too, is indebted to Jeanie, whose story serves as a warning that prompts Lizzie to exercise greater caution in her encounter with the goblin men.

Sisterhood and Redemption in “Goblin Market”

Laura’s succumbing to the temptations of goblin men leads her to pine all day long with her unsatiated desires as she can no more hear the iterated jingles of the goblins. It is when she “seemed knocking at Death’s door” (Rossetti 321) that Lizzie decides to enter the marketplace for the sake of her sister. This selflessness, along with the pain and humiliation she endures at the hands of the goblin men, establishes her as a Christ-like figure as noted by critics such as Dorothy Mermin. She saves both by her self-sacrifice and by her example (Mermin 112). By offering herself for Laura’s sake, Lizzie assumes a Christ-like role, and Laura’s healing through the fruit juices upon her body recalls the Christian doctrine of salvation through Christ’s sacrifice. Since the role of the redeemer in Judeo-Christian tradition is conventionally associated with a male figure, women are more often positioned as those in need of salvation rather than as agents of redemption. However, Rossetti overturns this power dynamic by assigning Lizzie the role of the saviour. She also blurs the distinction between the

moral and the immoral woman by refusing to depict Laura as an Eve-like figure whose transgression permanently defines her. Instead, Laura is portrayed as a curious, child-like character who is allowed to make mistakes and still attain redemption without being subjected to lasting moral condemnation.

Janet G Casey points out that “in a very subtle manner, however, Rossetti allows Lizzie to play the part of the redeemer as well as that of the redeemed” (Casey 68). She further contends that both sisters lack the qualities dominant in each other. While Lizzie initially lacks Laura's boldness, Laura lacks Lizzie's caution. Laura's decision to enter the marketplace ultimately allows the sisters to share and develop each other's strengths. Significantly, Lizzie's emergence as the heroine does not depend upon Laura's degradation. Lizzie earns admiration through her courage and self-sacrifice, while Laura remains a sympathetic figure whose vulnerability invites compassion rather than judgment. The themes of sisterhood and redemption are intricately intertwined in “Goblin Market,” as Rossetti rejects patriarchal punishments reserved for fallen women in favour of redemption and recovery through female solidarity and sisterly love.

Sisterhood and its Future Possibilities

Unlike most Victorian poems including Tennyson's “The Lady of Shalott” in which stepping out of the domestic sphere results in punishment and death, Rossetti provides recuperation to Laura and Lizzie who later become “wives with children of their own.” (Rossetti 448-449) Though the choices available to them seem limited, as they remain confined within the same oppressive domestic boundaries, there is still an element of choice in their lives. The poem reinforces that a single action does not determine a woman's fate. Unlike many female characters in works by male Victorian poets, Laura is not permanently excluded from domestic life after transgressing social and sexual boundaries. The poem not only foregrounds female solidarity and sisterhood but also suggests that when women enter an exploitative patriarchal domain, they must rely on one another for support.

Although Jeanie appears only three times in the poem, her role extends beyond that of a cautionary figure. Like Lizzie, she functions as a martyr-like presence through whose fate, the themes of female solidarity and sisterhood are articulated. A careful reading of her subtle role in the poem suggests that Jeanie did not lack morality or character, but a sister who could have helped draw her out of the quagmire from which fallen women seldom return without support. Jill Rappoport opines that “Lizzie’s repeated references to Jeanie (the goblins’ prior victim) suggest that her fears are not unfounded. Hers is a specialized form of service; an exclusive practice directed toward sisters. Only Laura can receive the more personal gift of Lizzie’s sacrifice” (Rappoport 866). While this reading foregrounds the intimate and familial dimension of Lizzie’s act, it risks narrowing Rossetti’s conception of sisterhood to strictly blood-related bonds. In “Goblin Market”, sisterhood functions not only as a biological relationship but also as an ethical and emotional network among women. Jeanie’s story, when compared to that of Laura and Lizzie, shows a kind of linear progression among generations of women, and the possibility of a future that would be more egalitarian for women. Jeanie’s caution does not warn women against stepping into the male-dominated world; rather, it warns against doing so without the support of sisters, whether bound by blood or not. The poem thus seems to assert that if Lizzie and Laura achieve redemption, unlike their predecessor Jeanie, it is because female solidarity and sisterhood offer the possibility of a future in which women can break free from the shackles of society. Rossetti, therefore, gestures towards the possibility of such sisterhood. In Laura’s narration of Lizzie’s bravery to her children, Rossetti not only inverts the tradition of men as legendary heroes but also looks forward to a female culture of remembrance that celebrates and performs acts of love, care and solidarity.

Conclusion

Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” challenges the Victorian notion of the “fallen woman” through its emphasis on sisterhood and female solidarity. The poem underscores the importance of networks of care and support among women as a means of survival within an exploitative patriarchal

world. Jeanie's story extends beyond a simple cautionary tale, highlighting the consequences of lacking sisterly support and the importance of its presence. Together, Jeanie, Laura, and Lizzie form a continuum that traces the possibilities of female experience, moving from vulnerability to recovery through increasing bonds of sisterhood grounded in love, care, and resilience. In Dorothy Mermin's words, "It is not a poem of bitter repression but rather a fantasy of feminine freedom, heroism, and self-sufficiency and a celebration of sisterly and maternal love." (Mermin 108)

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