

# Piercing The Fairy Spell in Goblin Market Through the Search of Explicit and Evasive Symbolism

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## **Abstract:**

Christina Rossetti's poem "Goblin Market", which was published in 1862, carries away the readers to an exotic land of the fairy tales. Though Rossetti overtly asserts that the target readers of this poem are children, the presence of different nuances and complexities of symbols and images in the poem challenges this claim to a great extent. On the surface the fantastical and simple nature of the poem makes it appear as a nursery rhyme meant for the children but in reality, the poem contains plethora of hidden messages presented through rich symbolism. Along with creating an ambience of magic and fantasy Rossetti adeptly handles the symbolic representation of elements such as the Biblical allusions, the allegory of temptation and redemption, Pre- Raphaelite ideal of equating art with morality, caution against pleasure-seeking and unrestrained self-gratification, significance of sisterly love, sexuality and portrayal of female strength and independence. This poem is a product of the Victorian era during which masculine and feminine roles were very sharply defined compared to any other age in history. In earlier ages women used to assist the male members of their family to run the family business by serving customers and keeping accounts alongside performing the household responsibilities. However, with the progression of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a revolution in the industrial field started to occur resulting in an increase in the number of factories and offices where men started commuting leaving behind the female folks at home to carry out the household duties in a restricted domestic life. Both the sexes started inhabiting separate domains. The Victorian ideology of disparate realms for male and female was based on the natural characteristics of both the sexes. Men were considered physically stronger but morally inferior to women. And this moral superiority proved them appropriate for the environment within the four walls of home. Rossetti's poem at once adheres to and transgresses the boundaries of the Victorian concept of womanhood. Rossetti has very dexterously used the instrument of symbolism whereby two different layers of symbols are created: downright symbols and evasive or derivative symbols which are to be comprehended in a round about way. The prime focus of this paper is to pinpoint and analyse the direct and derivative symbols in order to reach a more comprehensive signification of the poem titled Goblin Market.

**Keywords:** Nature, Victorian Womanhood, Female Agency, Sisterhood, Symbolism

## **Introduction:**

"We live in a fantasy world, a world of illusion. The great task in life is to find reality."

--- Iris Murdoch<sup>1</sup>

In Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* There are certain words which have bigger meanings or larger significations than they mean apparently in the poem. This is how a symbol functions in a literary text. Therefore, a symbol is a literary device through which an object or action is used to represent something beyond its literal meaning. When a word gains a symbolic significance it becomes more than mere word, it gains a universal sanction of a huge chunk of civilization. In this poem two sets of symbols are found: the first type of symbols are conspicuously prominent and the second kind of symbols are vague or subtle which are to be reached at by the process of derivation involving reflection. And there are some round about symbols in the poem which were not so very important or potent during the time the poem was written but over the passage of time in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century these symbols have gained significations.

### **An Analysis of the Archetypal and Explicit Symbols:**

An archetype, according to Carl Gustav Jung, is basically a primitive mental image which resides in the collective unconscious of the common people from different religious background that they have inherited from their earliest human ancestors. In other words, archetypal images remain present in one's mind not because of one's personal life's experiences but because across the ages human beings have gathered such images as a collective experience, consequently, those images and conceptions become very much a part of collective consciousness. In the view of C.G. Jung, "an individual has not only the ego and personal unconscious that Sigmund Freud demonstrated, but also a "collective" unconscious. The "collective" unconscious contains memories, imprints and modes of human development and behaviour conditioned by mankind's entire history. Jung argues that this collective unconscious manifests itself in the affairs of individuals by means of primordial images or patterns of psychic activities, which he calls "archetypes".<sup>2</sup>

The first most prominent archetypal symbol that Rossetti uses in the poem is the symbol of the fruit. The fruit symbolism is loaded with Biblical ethos. It is primarily equated with the forbidden fruit that Eve plucked from that tree of knowledge and what is important here is that Rossetti is talking about the taste being forbidden, the taste being an important element rather than the fruit itself which Milton also does in *Paradise Lost* where he talks about the mortal taste. The symbol of fruit becomes more than something one consumes to gain nutrition from. Fruit is usually considered as a positive element. A positive symbol representing health, nutrition and nature, something embodying a lot of natural element in it. But here that meaning is inverted. Here Rossetti is basically taking up natural images and turning them into something which they do not actually mean in real world. So, here the fruits become something very vicious and evil instead of being something which provides nourishment and nutrition. But when she mentions the names of the fruits they are ordinary, they are not fruits that people have never heard of. But since the origin of these fruits are in some summer meadow, we have a doubt about their positivity. So fruits which are positive symbols become negative symbols because they represent temptation. And because the fruits have these negative connotation become negative symbols and since the goblins are selling those fruits they become an extension of the Satan figure. It is noteworthy that how Rossetti is creating a new mental frame

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/iris\\_murdoch\\_386009](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/iris_murdoch_386009). Accessed 26 Mar. 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Davis, Joseph K. "IMAGE, SYMBOL, AND ARCHETYPE: DEFINITIONS AND USES." *Interpretations*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1985, pp. 26–30. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43797844>. Accessed 26 Mar. 2023.

through the fanciful atmosphere of the goblin market but at the same time directing the symbols towards a Christian allegory. So whenever the characters of the goblins are considered, one is reminded of the archetypal figure of Satan appearing through the figures of the goblins.

Another prominent symbol used by Rossetti is the symbol of fall and resurrection. In this poem Laura is portrayed as a figure susceptible to temptation posed by the goblins and eventually she goes through a period of damnation. Lizzie, on the other hand, is delineated as a saviour figure who plays a very instrumental role in bringing about the rise from the fall and eventually the resurrection. So from the religious perspective three types of figures are encountered in the poem: the goblins representing the Satan figure, Laura representing the human figure and Lizzie is, basically, the embodiment of the Christ figure.

Another phenomenal archetypal symbol that is present in the poem is related to the epithets which are used to describe the physical traits of the two sisters, Laura and Lizzie. Two very leading adjectives are 'white' and 'golden'. Down the ages the hues of white and golden are associated with purity and nobility, although these are essential qualities of the soul and not related to the superficial features of a person but this is how phenomenally archetypes influence the human consciousness. Rossetti, therefore, advertently uses expressions like 'Golden head', 'White and Golden Lizzie' to invoke readers' consciousness of purity, innocence and virginity. Rossetti further uses colours as a very potent device during the time when Laura goes to the goblin market to savour the taste of those exotic fruits sold by the goblin fruit sellers and while she returns home, thereafter, tasting those fruits. Laura clips off a part of her golden locks as a price for savouring those unearthly goblin fruits. After tasting those exotic fruits when she comes back home, a phase of depression overpowers Laura. During this phase the colour of her hair alters from golden to grey. The grey colour symbolises age, the phenomenon of wasting away, in short, it is a colour associated with degeneration. This change in the colour of hair very strongly hints at a direct connection with the change in Laura's situation. This is how the colours 'golden' and 'grey' symbolize the difference between purity and tarnishing, chastity and immorality.

Another archetypal symbol becomes apparent when Rossetti compares the goblin fruit sellers with doves, a symbol existing in the collective unconscious of the people associated with purity and innocence. But in reality the goblins are not symbols of peace and innocence rather they are the agents of temptation. But there is always a difference between originality and likeness which becomes evident from the lines of the poem itself:

"She heard a voice like voice of doves  
Cooing all together:  
They sounded kind and full of loves"

Just like traditional fairy tale villains such as the step mother of Snow White or the cunning Wolf who meets and tries to befool Little Red Riding Hood, the goblins in Rossetti's poem, in order to tempt and bring about the downfall of the two innocent sisters, assume alluring and attractive dispositions which apparently betray no complexity. Rossetti's connotation here is that evil always confronts the mankind under a thin veneer of charm and hospitality. It is only experience and prudence that can penetrate and shatter the alluring facade of temptation.

Then another customary symbol suggesting purity and simplicity is found when Rossetti compares Laura and Lizzie with white lilies. The flower lily which is white in colour is traditionally considered to represent purity and simplicity unlike roses which have a complicated structure and are believed to be concealing different nuances in its various folds. But there is a difference in the context in which these two sisters are compared to lilies. Laura is "Like a lily from the beck". The word 'beck' means

a stream, so Laura is like a lily which is blooming amidst a smooth flow of water without experiencing any kind of resistance. This symbolic comparison is quite apt since Laura willingly goes to the goblin market to taste those enchanting fruits, consequently she experiences no inner or outer struggle and resistance. In Rossetti's poem, the character of Laura represents a purity which is brittle. Lizzie, on the other hand, is compared to a "lily in a flood". This suggests that Lizzie is also pure as a lily but in order to maintain her existence with purity as a blooming lily she is constantly struggling and resisting the chaotic waters of flood. So while Laura is a symbolic representation of naivety and curiosity, the character of Lizzie is a representation of experienced struggle for pure existence.

Then again at one point in the poem the two sisters, Laura and Lizzie, are described as having "golden head". This figurative symbol suggest that the colour of their hair is golden. Across the centuries the metal, gold, is associated with honour and nobility. When Laura clips off her hair as a price for tasting those enchanting fruits, this act is symbolic of a dishonourable exchange. This suggests Laura is selling a part of her body to gain a particular favour which she desires. Therefore, Laura is converting her body into an object of trade in the field of commerce and thereby she is equated with a fallen woman, a prostitute, for whom the value of honour is meaningless. Lizzie, on the other hand, is also physically assaulted by the goblins when she goes to the goblin market for buying the fruits with the intention of saving her sister's life. At one point it is said that the goblins "Twitch'd her hair out by the roots". So strands of Lizzie's hair are also plucked by the goblins but this fact never tarnishes the character of Lizzie as a fallen woman, rather in her case it is the resistance for maintaining a dignified existence that becomes the focal point. In Laura's case the act of offering her lock of hair was voluntary for self-gratification but in case of Lizzie the fact of losing strands of her hair in the tussle with the goblins becomes a part of the resistance she puts up to protect honour.

Lastly, the archetype of Corpus Christie becomes prominent when Lizzie offers her own body to Laura so that she can taste the fruit juices from her body which the goblin fruit sellers have forcefully squeezed on Lizzie. Lizzie tells Laura:

"Eat me, drink me, love me  
Laura, make much of me;"

Thus, Lizzie establishes herself as a Christ figure redeeming Laura from a state of fall as a result of succumbing to temptation.

### **An Analysis of Evasive Symbols Emerging out of Contemporary Societal Principles:**

Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* is a poem published in the year 1862 when the principles of the Pre-Raphaelites were greatly influencing the field of art and literature. Doing away with the classical conventions of uniformity, congruity and proportion was the primary aim of the Pre-Raphaelites. Their chief aim was to produce a near photographic reproduction of scenes and situation through bright colours, minute details, lavish images and rich symbols. While representing Biblical subjects, they often fitted their private poetic symbolism in such contexts. Rossetti makes use of the Biblical symbol of the forbidden fruit but her representation of the same concept occurs in a roundabout manner very much keeping in mind the principles of the Pre-Raphaelite school of poetry.

At the very outset of the poem a very magnificent and vivid description of overall twenty- nine fruits is found. In this poem Christina Rossetti uses sensuous images that appeals to human sensation of sight, smell and hearing. Like every other Pre-Raphaelite poets, it seems as if Rossetti too thinks that that real literature is rooted in real life experiences where there is no ground for any kind of didactic, moral or

ethical codes which a poet should adhere to. Apparently it is a very beautiful and interesting poem that gives us a story in the form of a fairy tale like narrative. Initially, in the poem the imaginary and magical creatures known as goblins are found to be selling fruits. Rossetti mentions the names of various fruits along with attractive epithets by which the readers' senses are comforted, their ears are pleased and the readers are presented with a bombardment of flavours which make them almost relish the beautiful juices of different fruits especially the berries, which are quite exotic as they are not commonly much available, and thereby it produces the impression of exotic lands all the more strongly. Laura and Lizzie, the two sisters, can hear the cry of the goblin fruit sellers who are selling those mouth-watering fruits. But the responses of the two sisters to the cry of the goblins are unlike. Laura with curiosity bows her head to listen to the call of the goblins while Lizzie is hiding her 'blushes' which implies that she too is curious but in a subdued manner. After a moment we find Lizzie cautioning Laura not to look at the market of the goblins and not to buy their fruits since they have no knowledge about the place of cultivation of these fruits or any knowledge about the forest from which they were plucked. So, Rossetti right from the beginning of the poem invokes senses of wonder, attraction and fear with pictorial and detailed delineation of the exotic land. Rossetti's inclination for accurate detailing and near-photographic representation is very much symbolic of the prevalent Pre-Raphaelite principles in the contemporary society.

Another indirect symbol which is implicitly used by Rossetti in this poem is the symbol relating to innocence and experience. Laura is portrayed as a naive and innocent maiden while the character of Lizzie is delineated as more prudent and experienced. But this contrasted characterization of the two sisters does never suggest that Rossetti is prioritizing experience over innocence and vice versa. Since it is found that Lizzie, in spite of being prudent and restrained, "braved the glen" with the intention of saving Laura's life and suffers as she ventures into the goblin market. Rossetti's symbolic implication here is that innocence which sometimes brings about ignorance initially surrounds every human being, and because of this innocence people confront and go through various unexpected and unwanted ordeals experiencing suffering. Rossetti highlights the importance of courage and endurance to brave the situation of suffering, and to bring about a reversal in the situation of suffering through suffering. Lizzie's character is emblematic of such an idea where she herself suffers by braving the glen and ultimately succeeds in bringing about the redemption. Hence, suffering is important since it is only through suffering that redemption is achieved. Redemption always lies beyond experience.

Another implicit symbol that is found in the poem is the symbol related to the generous exercise of volition and personal choice. In this poem it is found that both Laura and Lizzie exercise their free will and choice of action with regard to the enchanted fruit sold by the goblins. But there is a difference in the choices of both the sisters. Laura goes to the Goblin market when she could not control her irresistible urge to taste those mouth-watering fruits of the goblins. In the poem it is mentioned that even Laura's "last restraint is gone" which suggests that Laura gives primal importance to her purpose of self-gratification. But in Lizzie's case, she steps into the goblin market not to consume those enchanted fruits but to buy them far saving Laura's life. Then it can be seen that Laura's choice reflects self-gratification while Lizzie's choice betrays selflessness. The same act of the two sisters of going to the goblin market and trying to buy fruits brings about different consequences based on their intensions. Thus, symbolically Rossetti suggests that choice has a direct connection not with action but with intension. Albert D. Pionke asserts that 'Lizzie's active resistance to the goblins during her own second encounter with them has

altered the meaning of Laura's second fall by radically shifting the terms of exchange- she has effectively reimagined the market, not as an abstracted cash nexus, nor as a system of barter, but as a gift economy'.<sup>3</sup>

Rossetti, further, represents with unclear symbolism the relation of women with property and commerce during the Victorian age through the activities of the two sisters when they visit the goblin market to buy fruits. The first wave of feminism was prevailing, during that time, with its demands of women's right to vote, property and medical health care. During the Victorian age the women had no property rights, the symbolic representation of which can be seen in Laura's words directed towards the goblin fruit sellers :

"I have no copper in my purse,  
I have no silver either,..."

It is because of the absence of economic independence that Laura resorts to the dark idea of clipping off a lock of her hair which is very much a part of her body as a high price to buy the fruits. If Laura had money then she would never have opted for offering her lock of hair as a price. Even in case of Lizzie it is found that although she goes to the goblin market with a penny as a price for buying those fruits, while she is returning from the goblin market after facing all the assaults posed on her by the goblins, she hears the jingling sound of her penny "Bouncing in her purse". The sound of this bouncing penny seems like a music to Lizzie's ear. This reaction of Lizzie proves that although she had a penny there was dire lack of her freedom to spend it. Therefore, Lizzie's happiness lies not in spending the penny but in saving it. Thus, a glimpse of the condition of women during the Victorian times is indirectly hinted at through this symbolic delineation.

Rossetti is also found to be symbolically substituting male heroism with female fortitude and agency. In this poetic fairy tale Laura is depicted as a maiden with desire and her state is fallen. Traditionally in fairy tales a fallen woman or a damsel in distress was usually rescued or resurrected by a valorous male hero. But no male hero in shining armour is found in Rossetti's poem. Instead of a male hero, she represents heroism through the character of Lizzie who is depicted as a redeemer. Thus, Rossetti symbolically subverts the traditional idea of heroism being associated with masculinity. What more is found in this poem is that female agency is at once questioned and celebrated by Rossetti. When Laura displays female agency by going to the goblin market with the intension of satiating her desire, she becomes a fallen woman. The same goblin market is visited by Lizzie with the intension of resurrecting a fallen maiden, Laura, and she turns out to be a saviour. Thus, the concept female agency is depicted with duality.

The final symbolic social message that Rossetti seems to imply is the marriage of the two sisters, Laura and Lizzie, both becoming wives and mothers. In various nineteenth century literary narratives and artistic works fallen women were generally depicted as dying or being transported to colonies outside England or otherwise not being allowed to marry and attain motherhood. By allowing Laura and Lizzie to marry and become mothers, and thereby attain the ideal state for women considered in the nineteenth century, Rossetti periphrastically challenges and flouts the established notion of the irredeemable nature of fallen women. Almost at the end of the poem Laura gives a counsel to her and her sister's daughter saying:

'For there is no friend like a sister.'

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<sup>3</sup> Albert D. Pionke, "The Spiritual Economy of 'Goblin Market'" *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 52, (2012), pp. 897-915, (p.903).

She urges them to remain unified together and embrace each other even at the time of adversities. Thereby Rossetti with this postfeminist symbol inspires female unanimity which in future will counter the perils posed by the exploitative ‘goblin’ men.

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