

A Study of Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market": Joining Hands to Little Hands

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Christina Rossetti posited a lovely sisterhood in "Goblin Market" that is different from the envious sisterhood in famous fairy tales. Rossetti promotes a cooperative relationship between women rather than a connection based on rivalry. As many critics noticed, "Goblin Market" is often interpreted referring to Christian symbolism as the redemption of Christ (Lizzie) and sometimes is seen as a reversal of "Sleeping Beauty". Recently, in 2008, Cynthia Demarcus Manson argued that "Goblin Market" symbolically complicates and enriches its retelling of the Christian redemption story by recasting it as the well-known fairy-tale romance of Sleeping Beauty (62).

Well-known fairy tales such as "Sleeping Beauty", "Cinderella", or "Snow White" portray a rivalry between mother and daughter or between sisters. Contrary to these conventional tales, Rossetti's "Goblin Market" illustrates a helpmate relationship: 'joining hands to little hands' (560). Referring to Manson's essay, in this essay I try to interpret Victorian women's social position as expressed in Rossetti's "Goblin Market" by comparing it with other heroines in some traditional fairy tales.

1. The Fairy Tales

Before entering my main theme, I would like to reconsider some heroine's paradigms that we might have read in our childhood. First, I will look at the heroine of "Snow White". In the tale, I centered on the relationship between three women, one is the Queen, mother of the Snow White, the second is the new Queen, her step-mother, and the third is the little Snow White herself.

Analyzing the three women's characters in "Snow White", it expresses three different figures of women. The mother queen sitting working in a window represents a typically traditional woman who was limited to the domestic sphere; then, the step-mother framed in her magic mirror may symbolize a new woman, eager to break out of their limitations peering at freedom out of domestic conventionality; and lastly, little Snow White who played a role to break the limits by living free in wood, a place out of woman's domestic realm. The new queen envied little Snow White not only because of her beauty but also because of her free life in the wood. Christina Bacchilega states, the "basic themes of Snow White are female development and female jealousy" (31). The relationship between the new queen and Snow White might be considered to be the jealousy of womanhood, in other words, a rivalry between women which doesn't exist between mother and daughter. It is an agreeable consideration as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar cite that such jealousy arises "not only by the queen's mirror obsession but by the absence of King from the story ..." (37) as the source of the woman's envy.

The basic theme of Snow White tends to emphasize the women's jealousy. Snow White's mother queen died in child birth and failed to educate Snow White on how to be a woman. Because Snow White has no chance to learn the daughter-mother relationship from mother, she is refused by her step-mother-queen due to the woman's jealousy. And the same them of the women's

jealous relationship is also seen in the case of “Sleeping Beauty”. “Sleeping Beauty” is a fairy tale of the destructive mother-in-law who tries to destroy her daughter-in-law and her children. Though Sleeping Beauty’s parents try to protect her daughter from the enchanted fate, they fail to teach her how to prevent herself from danger. Well known that it is not well for parents who over-protect their children. As Von Franz states, “it has the disadvantage of prevention the individuation of the daughter, who continues the positive feminine figure as a type, not as an individual, and cannot realize her specific difference from her mother” (167). Both mothers fail to teach their daughter how to be a woman and how to cooperate with her comrades. The heroine don’t know how to identify woman’s task. It is usually that girls learn and do things as their mothers do. This theory is proved by psychologists, as Franz states, that “[m]ost daughters have a certain archaic identity with their mother if they have a positive relationship with her, especially in childhood when the child talks to her doll as the mother talks to her, even repeating the mother’s voice and words” (167). Franz explains the relationship between daughter-mother that many women imitate to arrange her woman’s work “as mother did” (167).

Besides “Snow White” and “The Sleeping Beauty”, there is a similar relationship depicting women’s jealousy which appears in “Cinderella” between her and her stepmother and two step sisters. This is a regular pattern that is often used and familiar. Similarly as Snow White or Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella’s mother died in Cinderella’s youth. These heroines experienced the death of mother in childhood so that, as Franz describes, their “archaic mother-daughter identity is broken off” (167). According to Franz analysis, “the mother’s death is the beginning of the daughter’s process of individuation; the daughter is confronted with the task of finding her own femininity in her own form which entails going through all the difficulties of finding it” (167). That’s why Snow White and Cinderella “tends to identify with her own sex” (167) by

negotiating the step-mother.

The women's rival relationship is often emphasized in fairy tales. Referring to Bacchilega's description, for example,

“for Bruno Bettelheim, Snow White represents the daughter's successful resolution of the Oedipal conflict, N. J. Girardot focuses on the ritual and sacrificial pattern of initiation Snow White must undergo in order to rejoin her society as an adult. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar emphasize the constraints that patriarchal images such as the ‘angel-woman’ (Snow White) and the ‘monster-woman’ (the Queen) place on female characters and women readers’ potential” (31).

Illustrating this transformation, in *Symbolic Maternity*, Mitoko Hirabayashi precisely states the historical outline of the women's emancipation movement and explains the apparent progress of social transformation in regards to the earlier feminism. Reading about the character of the Prince in “Sleeping Beauty” or about seven dwarfs and the Prince in Snow White the author Joseph Jacobs might attempt not only to suggest women act as the house's angel, but also advises men to pay more attention to the wife and children instead of being absent at home or in family.

According to Hirabayashi, the woman's emancipation movement started in the 1790s. Women's pain and pleasure in the domestic realm started being noticed. Women authors began to be aware of women's unequal position in literature and in politics. Many representative female writers attempted to “illustrate woman's ambivalence about her restrictive life” (1) in their novels or poetry, for instance, Jane Austine's *Sense and Sensibility*, Emily Bronte's “The Caged Bird” (1848), Elizabeth Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, Sara Coleridge's “Poppies” (1834), and Christina Rossetti's “Goblin Market” (1872). I have selected Christina Rossetti's work for my presentation here.

2. “Goblin Market”

Christina Rossetti was born in 1830 and died in 1894. She was gifted with a literate family. “Her parents were Gabriele Rossetti, exile, poet, writer and professor, and Frances Mary (née Polidori), once a governess and now devoted wife and mother” (Thomans,13). Her sister Maria Francesca, who became a nun, was born in 1827; her brother Gabriel Charles Dante, a painter, poet, was born in 1828; William Michael was born 1829; Christina was the youngest. France Thomas describes the Rossettis as “precocious and gifted read avidly, drew, wrote poetry and stories” (13). Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” was written at 1859 and published in 1862. Thomas believes her poetry “is full of an odd magic, unlike anything else in English poetry, and not quite duplicated in Christina’s other work; but this oddness was as much part of Christina’s nature as the unflinching religious devotion” (166). Senaha, however, mentions about “women’s pain and pleasure” that ““Goblin Market’ illustrates Rossetti’s religious belief as well as her feminist resistance against Victorian society in the 1850s and 1860s” (113). In *Awaited Princess of Nineteenth Century*, Hirabayashi also interprets “Goblin Market” and “The Prince’s Progress” in terms of women’s and children’s happiness. In her poems, Rossetti illustrates women’s pain and offers the power of revival to encourage women to resurrect themselves from the depression. Senaha identifies that Christina Rossetti

“like other Victorian poets who write on the subject of woman, Rossetti portrays women’s pain and pleasure and punishes them when they leave their ‘caged’ conditions, but the poet’s conclusion is more optimistic and didactic than, say, male poet’s, because the poem is a reflection of the female poet’s real experience” (113).

Now I’d like to concentrate on “Goblin Market”. “Goblin Market” offers the readers various fancies, for example, the songlike litanies strengthen

the expression of poem's rhyme, the two sisters with diverse characters are considered as a psychic narrative story, or as the feminine struggling story, etc.

The poem starts with the cries of some little goblin men who come from the glen and offer a list of numerous fruits:

Morning and evening

Maids heard the goblins cry:

Here, it includes the dual aspects: "morning" embodies masculine and "evening" symbols feminine or "morning" is interpreted as heaven and "evening" is considered as Earth, that Rossetti interweaves both elements to let her poem start. And "Maids" representative women, "the goblins" are the men in this world. Rossetti recognizes, "morning and evening", men and women, heaven and earth, etc., are the most important elements of the world. Thus, Rossetti would write without lack of those essential elements in leading her readers into her poetic fantasitic world.

Come buy, come buy our orchard fruits,

Come buy, come buy:

Apples and quinces,

Lemons and oranges,

.....

Apricots, strawberries—

All ripe together

In summer weather,—

Morns that pass by,

Fair eves that fly;

The little goblins supply all kinds of delicious fruits to lure the two pure maids. Germaine Greer explains, "The goblins are like Christina's favorite animals, the small, grotesque wronged beasts that she loved to play with" (xxxii). The Goblin men cry:

Taste them and try:
 Currants and gooseberries,
 Bright-fire-like barberries,
 Figs to fill your mouth,
 Citrons from the South,
 Sweet to tongue and sound to eye;
 Come by, come buy. (1–30)

These cries are familiar to Rossetti from her childhood at Charlotte Street. According to Greer's interpretation,

“Their cries have been identified partly with the street vendors' cries that the children would have heard in Charlotte Street, and it is only too easy to imagine how excited and envious they felt about the goodies that their struggling father could not hope to buy for them” (xxxii).

The little goblins' offering fascinates the two maids, Laura and Lizzie. The two sisters are pure and beautiful as the woman's figures familiarly appearing in romantic literature. According to Greer's description, “they are maids, that is, virgins, which implies puberty and that they are beautiful, Lizzie, in fact, as beautiful as her namesake, with glossy golden hair, a gleaming swanlike neck, and a body as white as snow” (xxx). They love each other:

Golden head by golden head,
 Like two pigeons in one nest
 Folded in each other's wings,
 They lay down in their curtained bed:
 Like two blossoms on one stem,
 Like two flakes of new-fall'n snow
 Like two wands of ivory
 Tipped with gold for awful kings. (184–91)

In a description like this, we can see the influence of the Romantics on Rossetti,

particularly her favorites, like Keats and Tennyson. Unlike Snow White, Rossetti's heroines are beautiful with golden hair as most Romantic poets preferred. Manson indicates "The sisters themselves, who are crowned with golden hair, are portrayed as aesthetically beautiful through similes likening them to splendid works of human craftsmanship" (64). Menson interprets that to be "comparisons made between the sisters and aesthetically beautiful creations by humans not only suggest the sisters' beauty, but also hint that the sisters themselves are significant and valuable handiwork by a divine Creator" (64).

In a number of instances, just as the Romantic poets used the elements of nature in their works, Rossetti also imitates the skill of romantic poetry by describing her heroines using the imagery of nature:

Moon and stars gazed in at them,
 Wind sang to them lullaby,
 Lumbering owls forebore to fly,
 Not a bat flapped to and fro
 Round their nest (192–196)

Unlike the Romantic poems, however, Rossetti acknowledges the reality of society. Thus, Rossetti strengthens to express the good relationship between the two maids who seem to contradict the jealous or envious relationship that exist in fairy tales such as "Snow White" or "Sleeping Beauty". Laura and Lizzie rest,

Cheek to cheek and breast to breast
 Locked together in one nest. (197–198)

Rossetti knows woman's pain from her real experience with the "fallen woman" at the Anglican Sisterhoods. Where, Senaha believes that Rossetti realized her role as a poet who could encourage "so-called Victorian fallen women, or prostitutes, who were mentally and physically abused and

rehabilitated with mixed feelings of hope and desperation” (113). Doubtless the social transformation “from Romantic passivism to Victorian Activism” and the experience of working in the Anglican Sisterhood that made Rossetti conceive of the changing positions of women in the Victorian period during 1850s much like other female poets.

Surely, Senaha’s comments identify the Victorian sisterhood of Rossetti’s two sisters in “Goblin Market” as “a nineteenth-century feminist representation of women, rouses women to the importance of ‘sisterhood’ and ‘action’ by which suffering, in the process of achieving the ‘new world’, could be replaced with pleasure after all” (124). Such a struggle for woman could be seen in Rossetti’s earlier works, like “Maude”. “Maude”, written when Rossetti was nineteen, is regarded as a semi-autobiographic novella about three girls’. The fifteen-year-old heroine, Maude Foster, was posited to be, like Gilbert’s description, as “a surrogate for Rossetti herself” (549). And Gilbert comments that “Maude/Rossetti should die because she obviously sees herself as a fragile, vainly costumed lady, no ruler of nature at all but a tormented servant” (553).

Unlike Maude, however, Rossetti did not die. Gilbert and Gubar distinguish the difference between Rossetti herself and Maude, that “[w]hile Maude lies passively, angelically, dutifully dead—and the living Christina Rossetti takes up her pen to spend a lifetime writing ‘Amen for us all’” (554).

Similar to “Maude”, men don’t exist in “Goblin Market”. In “Goblin Market”, the goblins that symbolize the men’s world, for example, a world of arts, or male poets’ societies where her brother Dante had led Rossetti, are like the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Certainly, Rossetti tends to attend the male-oriented world but she feels afraid in that unknown world. To Rossetti, the male-oriented article world is thought as a grotesque world as similar to how she imaged the goblins’ world. And the goblin’s world seems not to good for a maid to peep. Though Rossetti creates an imaginative figure of vital characters:

One had a cat's face
 One whisked a tail,
 One tramped at a rat's pace,
 One crawled like a snail,
 One like a wombat prowled obtuse and furry,
 One like a ratel tumbled hurry skurry. (71–76)

Rossetti prohibits the goblins from the world of maids.

When Laura met them in the glen, goblin merchants had shown various goods to attract to the golden haired maid.

One hauls a basket,
 One bears a plate,
 One lugs a golden dish
 Of many pounds weight
 How fair the vine must grow
 Whose grapes are so luscious;
 How warm the wind must blow
 Thro' those fruit bushes. (56–63)

Laura “wonders at goblin merchant man” (70) and desires to taste the goblins’ fruits. This could be seen as the expression of the anxieties of women or Rossetti herself who attempted to enter the literary world. Greer describes it,

“The poem is so compelling because troubling ideas exist within it quite unanalyzed, as they do in dreams. It is driven by the paradoxical motivations of Christina’s yearning for ecstasy, her fear of male insensibility and rapacity and her repugnance for carnal intercourse” (xxxix).

Samely, Ellen Morers comments

“the poem does belong to the nursery; its preoccupations are all infantile and all thoroughly corrupt. It reminds us once for all that there is nothing

innocent about childhood and so strikes as the root of a cherished adult fantasy” (based on Greer’s “introduction”, xxxi).

Certainly, it could be seen as Rossetti’s psycholoical progress From “Maude” to “Goblin Market”. Rossetti herself shows interest or fascination in the male literary world though it seems to her as an unfamiliar, uncertain and somewhat hesitant world. Her hesitation simply appears in the description of the goblin’s figures. Gilbert and Gubar suggested that the mental struggle of female writers in the male-dominated society. Gubar and Gilbert indicate that

“Young ladies like Laura, Maude, and Christina Rossetti should not loiter in the glen of imagination, which is the haunt of goblin men like Keats and Tennyson—or like Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his compatriots of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood” (573).

Lizzie represents Christina’s sister Marian or her mother who had worked as a governess like the other young women did and knew writing was not a suitable job for sister, Christina. That is why the wit Lizzie met Laura at the door gate and warned her:

Dear, you should not stay so late,
 Twilight is not good for maidens;
 Should not loiter in the glen
 In the haunts of goblin men.
 Do you remember Jeanie,
 How she met them in the moonlight,

 Where she lies low:
 I planted daisies there a year ago
 That never blow (143–162)

Moral lessons are often used in fairy tales, for example, in Snow White, the

seven dwarfs warned Snow White not to open the door to let anyone enter their house. Certainly, Rossetti used the common moral lesson in her works without any hesitation. The fruits of goblins did not exist in the real world. So when Laura ate it, her appetite increased and she desired more. As in Old Testament, Eve succumbed to Satan's temptation to eat the forbidden fruit. C. W. Hassetti criticizes her condition saying that

“The fruit she (Laura) desires is not simply missing, it is withheld. Rossetti's goblins are not just tempters, they are desire, or rather the agents of desire's paradox; they deal in what arouses, exhilarates, and injures appetite, and the sisters experience them differently. Each in her own way is a desire of the goblins' fruit, and each discovers for herself the convulsive, self-divided nature of her yearnings.” (20).

After eating the fruits of goblin, Laura's heart is absent in the desire for more goblin's fruits and forgets her maiden role and work.

Lizzie with an open heart
 Laura in an absent dream
 One content, one sick in part
 One warbling for the mere bright day's delight
 One longing for the night (210–214)

Eating the Goblin's fruit is a sin for maidens. Comparing “Goblin Market” with Sleeping Beauty or Snow White, Laura's fate could be thought of as resembling the princess of Sleeping Beauty or of Snow White. Manson comments both Laura and Sleeping Beauty fell into spell “as a result of their curiosity” (64). Laura caused by eating the fruit of Goblin, Sleeping Beauty by her “grasping a spindle and pricking her finger” (86) and Snow White by eating a poisoned apple. After eating the goblin's fruits, Laura lost her sensation of sight, hearing, as Manson indicates, “Laura slips into a sleep-like state of semiconsciousness, in which she disengages from her surroundings” (64). Laura can hear the cries

of the goblin no more though. Laura was depressed:

Must she then buy no more such dainty fruit?
 Must she no more such succous pasture find,
 Gone deaf and blind? (257–259)

Laura becomes despairing; she laughs no more and hesitates:

Her tree of life drooped from the root:
 She said not one word in her heart's sore ache:
 But peering thro' the dimness, nought discerning,
 Trudged home, her pitcher dripping all the way;
 (260–264)

She wishes for “balked desire”, and cries “as if her heart would break” (268).

Observing her sickened sister, “Tender Lizzie could not bear to watch her sister's cankerous care/ yet not to share” (ll/ 299–301). Lizzie remembers Jeanie who “fell sick and dies in her gay prime,/ in earliest Winter time” (ll/ 315), so that Lizzie “long[s] to buy fruit to comfort her [Laura],/ But fear[s] to pay too dear” (ll/ 310–311). Then, Laura fell sick and eat no more, Lizzie hesitates no more and takes a coin from her purse to start her trip to the goblin men's glen for Laura. She brings a coin and tries to buy goblin's fruits with the money but refuses to eat the goblin's fruit with them for her sister who awaited her home alone. Goblins refuse to sell their fruits for money, they say “[s]uch fruits as these/ No man can carry” (ll/ 375–376). Goblins try to force Lizzie to eat in any ways they can, but they fail.

Their tones waxed loud,
 Their looks wer evil.
 Lashing their tails
 They trod and hustled her,
 Elbowed and jostled her,
 Clawed with their nails,

Barking, mewling, hissing, mocking,
Tore her gown and soiled her stocking, ...

.....

Held her hands and squeezed their fruits
Against her mouth to make her eat. (396–407)

Lizzie behaves bravely against the goblins' violence. Greer describes, "Lizzie is energy, whether she is braving the encounter with the goblin men, or greedily sucking their fruit, or writing in medicinal torment" (xxxix). Thus, critics often interpret Lizzie as a female Christ in the Christian conception by sacrificing herself for her sister. The difference between Laura and Lizzie has always been considered as the personal psychological conditions, both interior and exterior nature of Rossetti's. Exactly, it is Rossetti's her hesitant emotions that considered as her passive and positive characters. Greer indicates, "[b]oth characters seem to have existed in [Rossetti] side by side—the child who ripped up her arm with scissors and the woman who knitted her eternal worsted spoke sparingly" (xxxix).

“Did you miss me?
Come and kiss me.
Never mind by bruises,
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.
Eat me, drink me, love me;
Laura, make much of me;
For your sake I have braved the glen
And had to do with goblin merchant men.” (465–474)

Lizzie Succeeds in bringing the juice of goblin's fruits home and allows her sickening sister to suck it. Because Lizzie acts as “a female Saviour, negotiates

with the goblins (as Christ did with Satan) and offers herself to be eaten and drunk in a womanly holy communion” (566). Lizzie saves Laura and Laura transforms “back from a lost witch to a virginal bride and ultimately leading her into a heaven of innocent domesticity” (566).

Laura is strong enough to bear her desire and renunciation. Greer describes her, “Laura is hardly ever physically described although she is included in the description of them as equally white and equally golden-haired. Laura’s strength is the strength of inertia and renunciation: she acts slowly but she does not swerve and carries her intention to its completion. She can wear out the goblins simply by relentless passivity” (xxx).

Laura suffers in desiring more fruit; Lizzie pains in refusing against the goblin men’s temptation as Laura did. Senaha asserts that “suffering is required when one takes an action to reach a new world and the pain is transformed to pleasure. In this poem, the pain of Laura and Lizzie is rewarded by learning sisterhood” (142) Similarly Gilbert and Gubar describe Rossetti “As a representative female poet-speaker, moreover, Rossetti believes she must learn to sing selflessly, despite pain, rather than selfishly, in celebration of pleasure” (571). Now, Laura recovers from her desire and gets rid of sickness and agony; Lizzie transforms her pain into pleasure by saving her lovely sister. Senaha praises Rossetti’s sisterhood:

“Rossetti believes that suffering is a positive process that leads to a higher level of happiness if the effort is made by sororal love. In fact, when Lizzie comes back with goblin fruits, Lizzie’s awakening starts. Laura realizes her sister’s selfless love and discovers ‘the new world’ of sisterhood. Laura is a fallen woman, but her suffering is a fortunate fall: she finds pleasure in pain as she reborn by Lizzie’s sororal exorcism” (132).

Laura would call the little ones
And tell them of her early prime,

Those pleasant days long gone
 Of not-returning time:
 Would talk about the haunted glen,
 The wicked, quaint fruit-merchant men,
 Their fruits like honey to the throat
 But poison in the blood;
 (Men sell not such in any town)

.....

Would tell them how her sister stood
 In deadly peril to do her good,
 And win the fiery antidote:

“Suffering” allows Laura to grow and understand the important helpmate relationship that “sisterhood is the strongest tie in the world” (Senaha, p. 134) and Laura acknowledges her role to teach her children about the sisterhood.

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” (548–567).

3. Conclusion

Snow White emphasizes the beauty and rivalry between women, similarly, Cinderella does too. Mostly, it is a popular paradigm that fairy tales strengthen

women's beauties which in turn cause a rivalry between them. Regretfully, fairy tales usually fail to teach women how to love their comrades as sisters, mothers and daughters. Referring to Bacchilega's description,

“the heroines exceptional beauty sets in motion the drama of jealousy may help to explain why critics have focused on the magic mirror so insistently that it has become a metaphor for Snow White itself” (Bacchilega, 31).

In “Goblin Market”, Rossetti emphasizes the importance of sisterhood both from her experience in Anglican Sisterhood and from her mother's and sister's devotion. Rossetti recognizes “her social role as a poet who could give religious, as well as moral, lessons to the penitents. Rossetti's lesson, “there is no friend like sister” doubtless refers to the sisters who were willing to sacrifice themselves to help women” (134). And exactly, it is through Rossetti's dedication to the poem that she wants to reward to her mother and her sister Marian, too.

ps. The essay is written according to the manuscript of my oral presentation on 61th Central Japan English Studies, in Aichi 2009.

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