

## Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market": Jesus in the Glen

For over a century, Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" has fascinated readers worldwide. Not only has it fascinated many critics and readers alike, but it has been vehemently claimed by various and very different groups as a sort of anthem for their cause. Members of the feminist movement embrace the poem, declaring that Rossetti was a pioneer in the liberation of women from the stringent and sexually oppressive bonds of Victorian society. Members of the gay community have also praised this piece, claiming it to be Rossetti's way of subtly advocating lesbian love. There has also been a much more conservative interpretation of the poem, which suggests that Rossetti was writing a cautionary tale, warning children (girls, specifically) of the dangers of sexual sin and men in general. What is harder to find is the discussion of the religious imagery and biblical allusions that riddle the lines of this poem. This is surprising, taking into account Rossetti's avid dedication to the Church. Why couldn't "Goblin Market" be a stage for her to put her twist on an age-old tale, or discuss the Christian themes of temptation, sin and redemption? Well, it could. And that is exactly what I would like to explore. Obviously it is impossible to decide with any certainty the statement that Rossetti set out to make with "Goblin Market." However, with so much room for debate, there is ample space for a religiously themed discussion.

A close look at the text could easily recall many passages and images from the Bible, but even without a close dissection the religious suggestion is unavoidable. One could start with the basic storyline: two sisters, working in the glen, both tempted with delicious and dangerous fruit. One falls to temptation and eats the fruit, which eventually leads to the destruction of both of them. Sound familiar? It should. Who is not familiar with the Bible's Eve and her encounter with the forbidden fruit? It is not even necessary to be Christian to know the story. Considering virtually universal familiarity of this theme, it is not a great stretch to see the parallels between Christianity's Eve and Rossetti's Laura. Like Eve, Laura is confronted with a temptation that is so great, she is willing to risk her life to experience it. Eve's "fruit" is described as such, perhaps because of the delicious nature of the sin. Whether or not the act of eating the forbidden fruit in

the Bible was intended to be metaphorical or literal is a separate debate, one not to be argued here. But the likeness of Eve and Laura's "fruit" cannot be denied. And of course, like Eve, Laura surrenders to her desires and is undone by her disobedience. Is this a coincidence? It's possible. However, considering Rossetti's great talent, it does not even make sense to think that this was an accident, that she failed to see the likeness in her own writing. So already, without even digging into the lines of the text, the poem suggests an allusion to a well-known biblical story. But it's not necessary to stop with this comparison.

Again, without going any deeper than the general plot, there appears to be a character in Rossetti's poem that resembles another major character of the Bible. Who? Why, it's the one, the only: Jesus Christ. Yes, there are fundamental similarities between Jesus and Lizzie. In one tale there is Jesus, the pure and divine brother of Man, who works alongside his (earthly) brothers, while teaching them Christian values. He talks to them and pleads for them to strive for righteousness and purity. In the secular tale is Lizzie, the pure woman who also works alongside her wayward sister, all the while pleading for her to run from sin and avoid temptation. Of course, both Lizzie and Jesus are put to the test and refuse to fall to temptation. Jesus faces his goblins when he is led into the wilderness and tempted for forty days and nights ( Mat. 4. 1-11). Lizzie also faces her temptation while in the wilderness. Rossetti's wilderness is not the desert of course, but it is a place that is free and wild, and crawling with goblins. Her martyr is able to cover her eyes so that she is shielded from the very sight of her horrible tempters and their damning fruit. Even in the midst of a violent attack, both heroes refuse to submit. This non-faltering strength and dedication to their loved ones lead each of them into a similar and tragic situation.

Despite the warnings that Lizzie and Jesus give to their family, both protagonists witness their brethren fall to temptation. And both sacrifice themselves in order to save their loved ones from the consequences of rebellion. Laura's act of self-sacrifice can be likened to Jesus' crucifixion on many levels. At the surface, there are obvious similarities between the two scenes. When Jesus is sacrificed, he endures a physical death (Mat. 27. 50). While Lizzie is not physically killed, she is stripped of her innocence, and the virtuous life that she had is surely taken as well.

Both spend the last moments of their life surrounded by their persecutors' taunts, jeers, and assaults. Because of their acts of sacrifice, their family is able to live. The relationship could only be clearer if Rossetti had named Laura "Jesus" or "Sacrificial Lamb." This portrayal of self-sacrifice may be the most obvious and profound similarity between "Goblin Market" and popular biblical imagery, but it is far from being the only one. A look within the poem's lines reveals even more.

Redirecting the focus from the poem's overall theme to the lines and images within the text doesn't end the occurrences of Christian allegory, but rather exposes even more of the imagery lacing the stanzas. Among these images, there are a couple that Rossetti repeats throughout the poem, honey being one of them. The girls (Laura and Lizzie) collect honey regularly as they complete their chores throughout the day, but it is also used frequently to describe the goblins and their fruit. The goblins' voices are smooth as honey (108). True, that could easily be written off as a coincidence. It's mentioned again in line 129, when Laura first eats of the goblins' wares, and as she sucks the fruit (very sensually, at that) the juices of the fruit are described as "sweeter than honey." Again, this could be another coincidence; after all, honey is sweet, is it not? However, as the story progresses, the repeated images of honey recall a passage in the Bible that was surely familiar to Rossetti:

For the lips of a loose woman drip honey,  
And her mouth is smoother than oil;  
But in the end she is bitter as wormwood,  
Sharp as a two-edged sword. (Prov. 5. 11)

Does this sound familiar? It should, because after Laura had taken the fruit that was "sweeter than honey" her mouth still watered (129, 167). True, saliva is not exactly oily, but it could certainly give one's lips the appearance of being smooth, or glistening, as if they were oiled. And later, after she's taken the juices of the fruit for a second time, the honey-sweet fruits become "wormwood to her tongue" (498). Is this another coincidence? It's hardly fair to believe so. Using the biblical passage as a reference, the previous references to honey seem to serve a purpose that is a little more significant than simply describing fruit. She does something very similar with

her references to the lily.

There are various comparisons between the lily and the sisters during the poem. Images of the lily are also sprinkled throughout the Bible, and for many Christians it brings to mind thoughts of life and renewal. For example, the lily is a fixture during the celebration of Easter, during which Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. However, the lily is also used to symbolize something slightly different, in a way that may not be quite as familiar to many, but likely known to someone as learned in the Bible as Rossetti:

My beloved is mine, and I am his.

He feeds his flock among the lilies.

(Song of Solomon. 2. 16)

It's important to understand that Song of Solomon is indeed a song, a love song to be specific. There appear to be two speakers in the book, who alternate singing praises and sensual lyrics to and about one another. It is full of sexual allusions and is typically read as an erotic allegory. The reference to the man's "flock" is carried throughout the book and seemingly serves as a phallic symbol. Again, the lilies are used, in the midst of a passage where the male is praising his lover's body, in a very sexual manner:

Your two breasts are like two fawns,

Twins of a gazelle,

Which feed among the lilies.

(Song of Solomon. 4. 5)

Lips are also described as "lilies, dripping liquid myrrh" (Song of Solomon. 5. 13). And there is yet another very provocative image, which uses the lily to describe the woman:

The curves of your thighs are like jewels,

The work of the hands of a skilful workman.

Your navel is a rounded goblet;

It lacks no blended beverage.

Your waist is a heap of wheat

Set about with lilies.

(Song of Solomon. 7. 1-2)

Considering the lilies of Solomon, Rossetti's uses of the image make perfect sense. Her first reference to the lily comes when she is describing Laura, who stretches her neck "like a lily from the beck" to peek at the goblin men and their fruit. It could be that Laura is exposing her sexuality, or at least her desire to explore it (83). And it makes sense, assuming that the goblins are representative of men and their fruits of sexual pleasure.

It may help to add here that much of Song of Solomon, the couple compare one another's anatomy to lush gardens and orchards bountiful with luscious fruit, which they take turns sampling. At one point the woman compares her lover to an apple tree, claiming "his fruit was sweet to my taste" (2:3), and begging him, "Refresh me with apples, for I am lovesick" (Song of Solomon. 2. 3, Song of Solomon. 2. 5). Another great example of this comes in Chapter 4:16:

[...] Blow upon my garden,  
That its spices may flow out.  
Let my beloved come to his garden  
And eat its pleasant fruits.

So, it's not surprising at all to find Lizzie being compared to a "lily in the flood" (409) when she is being assaulted by the goblin men, having them squeeze their fruits against her mouth, leaving her face dripping with their juices (409). Still, after the assault, the lily remains, but it isn't until after her encounter with the goblins that the lily is now "honey-sweet" (416).

Lilies. Honey. Jesus. Eve. Are all of these images related in the Bible's context? Actually, are *any* of these images related to one another in the Bible? It may be difficult to find a way to directly relate these images to each other. And that may not be what Rossetti was trying to do. However, the closer the text is examined, the clearer it becomes that she wanted to show some relationship between her characters in "Goblin Market" and certain Christian ideals. Was she retelling the story of Jesus Christ, tracing the sin of Man back to Eve and her lustful eye? Was she demonstrating Eve's role in the need for Jesus to sacrifice himself? It's possible. It's also possible that the connections between Goblin Market and the Bible don't really exist. They could simply be a series of unintentional coincidences. However, it's fair to say that to make that claim would

definitely be unfair to Rossetti. A woman so dedicated to the Bible and its teachings would certainly have noticed if these religious allusions just “fell into her writing.” Therefore, not only is it fair, but it is necessary to consider that Rossetti may very well have considered Eve, Jesus, the lilies and honey of Christianity while weaving her tale of goblins and maidens.

Works Cited

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