

Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market": A Feminist and Psychoanalytical Study

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Abstract:

The paper aims to examine the perspectives from which a psychoanalytic critic and a feminist critic might analyze Christina Rossetti's poem, "Goblin Market". A psychoanalytic critic might incorporate the concepts of uncanny, double and repression as well as Lacan's stages of development; on the other hand, a feminist critic might analyze the poem on the basis of essentialist and constructionist perspectives of feminist literary discussions, Gilbert and Gubar's concepts of binary opposition of angel/monster and of anxiety of authorship. The main finding of the paper is that most of the points of interest of criticism of the poem may be the same for a psychoanalytic critic and a feminist critic, the interpretations of the two critics are contrastive owing to their different interpretive framework.

Keywords: Christina Rossetti, psychoanalysis, Goblin Market, feminism

Christina Rossetti's poem, *Goblin Market* revolves around the two sisters namely Lizzie and Laura. Thus the relationship between the two sisters would hold interest of and intrigue both the psychoanalytic critics and feminist critics. The psychoanalytic critics might view the sisterly relationship between Lizzie and Laura in terms of the 'double' (Rivkin & Ryan, 425). The two sisters seem to be identical by reason of looking alike. Christina Rossetti draws a close parallel between the two sisters in regards to their appearance such as their golden hair ('golden head')(Rossetti), their youthful beauty ('two blossoms') (Rossetti), their delicate bodies ('two flakes of new-fall'n snow') (Rossetti), and their white skin ('two wand of ivory') (Rossetti). The idea of the two sisters being doubles of each other is further extended in Lizzie's ability to identify and feel the 'cankorous care' (Rossetti) of Laura. Though Laura does not 'share' her intense anguish yet Lizzie feels it so deeply and distinctly that she forgets her earlier 'self' that considered the goblins and their fruits evil. She now resembles Laura who listens and looks at goblins and then, in the process, much like Laura becomes 'thirsty, canker'd, goblin-ridden' (Rossetti). On the other hand, a feminist critic might look at the two sisters, Laura and Lizzie as representing 'essentialist and constructionist perspectives respectively of the feminist literary discussions' (Rivkin & Ryan, 766). In the very beginning of the poem, Lizzie displays immense self-restraint and wisdom in resisting tempting fruits of the goblins. She is rational enough to learn a lesson from Jeanie who was known to have pined away her life in anticipation of goblins' fruits. Again displaying her intelligence, she cautions her sister, Laura to beware the goblins' fruits. Even though Laura disobeys her and faces serious repercussions of tasting goblins' fruits, Lizzie exhibits emotional flexibility and replaces her earlier strictness with care for Laura. In all this, Lizzie proves that gender is not innate but is a construct of the society and women can be as intelligent, objective and rational as men are supposed to be. Lizzie further exemplifies that women can be as much 'masculine' as men in the self-assertive and aggressive manner in which she resists the goblins' attempts to make her suck their fruits and yet win for Laura a beautiful and healthy life. If Lizzie epitomizes constructionist perspective, then Laura represents essentialist perspective. Laura shows herself excessively emotional and given to indulge her feelings by visiting

the goblins and sucking the fruits despite having been prohibited by Lizzie. Once she tastes fruits, she suffers passively without making any attempts to overcome her miserable physical and psychological state. Laura thus supports an essentialist's viewpoint that a woman is, by nature excessively emotional, passive and irrational.

A feminist critic may also situate the two women, Lizzie and Laura in the context of binary opposition of angel/monster as given by Gilbert and Gubar (813). Lizzie would appear an angel to the goblins who conforms to the conventional norms of being emotional and submissive. But Laura would be labeled a monster by the goblins who resists their evil influence thereby betraying the attributes of activity, courage, and intellectual strength.

From the point of view of Gender Studies, the two sisters, Lizzie and Laura exemplify that 'gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo' (901). Both the sisters are female yet their acts establish their identities differently. Laura repeatedly displays her curiosity and attraction towards goblins' fruits as she looks intently at the goblins, stretches her neck and bows her head to hear the goblin's cries. Despite Lizzie's warnings, she tastes goblins' fruits and having done so once, she continues to crave for more and more. Thus, she repeatedly projects herself as 'feminine' that is given to vulnerability and careless and impulsive behavior. However, Lizzie maintains a rational stand and draws a lesson from the past when her friend, Jeanie having eaten goblins' fruits had wasted away her life pining for more. She continuously shows restraint, wisdom and caution against the temptation of goblins' fruits. She blushes at the goblins' cries but hides her blushes carefully, thrusts her finger in her ears and shuts her eyes thereby preventing herself from falling into the trap of goblins and their poisonous fruits. She thus epitomizes the American gender theorist, Judith Butler's view that gender is not natural rather how one acts daily and incessantly.

The goblins' fruits and their effect also invite differing analysis from a psychoanalytic critic and a feminist critic. A psychoanalytic critic would find that though goblins' fruits such as apples, lemons, melons, apricots, strawberries, oranges, figs, currants and so on are commonplace and ordinary but they cast an adverse effect upon Laura. What creates this 'uncanny' (418) effect is that Laura loses her appetite and vigor after tasting the apparently innocuous fruits so much so that it appears that she was fast approaching death. On the other hand, the adverse effect that the goblins' fruits have on Laura would enable a feminist critic to read into the image of goblins. It indirectly indicates the deceptive and wicked character of goblins that they had cunningly hidden behind a familiar and innocent exterior. To a feminist critic, goblins' fatal fruits would symbolize the allurements such as comfort and security that are flashed by men to attract women and turn them into 'angels of the house'. But like the fruits, these enticements rob women of their identity and vitality, and ensure their inferior and subordinate position and the supremacy and dominance of men in male-oriented society. The manner in which the goblins force their fruits into Lizzie's mouth represents the efforts to silence a woman or distort the life of a woman who appears assertive or rebellious in a patriarchal society.

Laura's response to the goblins' fruits might be interpreted by Freudian critics as an instance of 'repression' (Eagleton, 145). After eating the goblins' fruits once, Laura continues to yearn for the fruits passionately. The repressed desire develops in Laura a sort of neuroses. Laura becomes obsessed with the goblins and craves secretly to take a look at them or hear their cry. Her obsession is further evidenced in the way she tries to sprout the stone of fruit by providing it nourishment of the sun rays and moisture of her tears. However her efforts prove futile but her passionate desire remains unfulfilled. This suppressed but lingering longing then manifests itself in Laura's dreams.

Laura dreams of the dainty melons that the goblins sold which is a symbolic fulfillment of her desperate desire for the goblins' fruits.

Yet another way in which psychoanalytic critic might analyse Laura's attraction towards goblins' fruits and then sucking them is in terms of *stages in Lacan's narrative of development* (142). Laura's attraction towards goblins' fruits and tasting them is symbolically the acquisition of language by a child. This along with Lizzie who represents the phallus initiates Laura's entry into 'symbolic order' and makes Laura aware of a sense of 'lack' (145). Laura says to Lizzie that though she had eaten the fruits to her satisfaction yet her 'mouth waters still' (Rossetti). She becomes a prey to desire that she expresses in multiple signifiers such as fresh plums, cherries, figs, icy-cold melons, peaches, pellucid and grapes. However Laura's craving remains unsatiated and she hastily moves towards her decay. The same point of Laura's irresistible attraction towards the goblins' fruits and her act of tasting them despite the warnings of Lizzie may, to a feminist critic of essentialist perspective represent a woman's excessive emotional nature and a tendency to indulge her desires and feelings.

The question of restoration of Laura's health by Lizzie would be dealt with differently by a psychoanalytic critic and a feminist critic. A Lacanian critic might argue that Laura is able to see a mirror image of herself in Lizzie when Lizzie, for her sake tries to buy the goblins' fruits. She enters into 'mirror stage' (Eagleton, 142) and visualizes that Lizzie would have gone through the same pain and agony, and the same 'thirsty, canker'd, goblin-ridden' state of being as she had experienced after tasting the goblins' fruits. Hence, she begins to construct a sense of unitary selfhood by finding something (Lizzie) with which (whom) she could identify. She finds a completeness that had been lost earlier ('lack') in her desire for goblins' fruits and that now contributes towards the reinstatement of her health and innocence. A feminist critic might consider Lizzie's successful attempt in restoring Laura's health as the eventual triumph of women over men in a patriarchal society. The sisterly bond that Laura celebrates in the end might point towards an ideal, a relationship or a way out of patriarchal oppression.

Unlike a psychoanalytic critic, a feminist critic would place the poem and Rossetti, the poet, a *female writer* in the context of Victorian age during which it was written and evaluate if Rossetti suffers from anxiety of authorship (Rivkin and Ryan, 824). Rossetti 'kills' the age-old images of a woman as projected by male writers and establishes her own discourse. Through the sterling personality of Lizzie, Rossetti subverts the definition of an 'angel' woman in Victorian era as one who was passive, submissive, emotional, timid, and who embraced self-sacrifice. Rossetti portrays Lizzie an 'angel' in true sense of the word by imparting to her the ability to restore hope and life by virtue of being active, intellectual, brave, and resistant to external pressure. She also embraces Gilbert and Gubar's image of an 'angel' (813) on her own terms by combining in Lizzie feelings of self-sacrifice and self-protection. Lizzie risks her security and braves the goblins to get their fruits for Laura but in the attempt, does not surrender her own self by tasting the deadly fruits. From the perspective of Gender Studies, Lizzie's dare devilry and stupendous efforts to save her sister by combating the strong and evil force of goblins go on to prove a woman's ability to undercut the constricting social norms and expand the possibilities of gender. Lizzie challenges the historical notions of a woman as being easily suppressible and by dint of her daring acts constructs the 'feminine' gender that is different from the social norm.

Rossetti also shows how the character of Lizzie embraces Cixous's concept of bisexuality. Lizzie integrates gender binaries in such a way that one does not cancel the other but displaces it. She demonstrates 'feminine' attribute of being desirous of goblins' fruits and blushing at the sight of them but soon replaces it with the 'masculine' trait of rationality in veiling her blushes and

maintaining an objective stance in the face of goblins' tempting but fatal fruits. Again, she appears 'feminine' in her intense feeling and emotion towards her sister, Laura on seeing her dwindling in the desire for goblins' fruits but displaces her 'feminine' self with 'masculine' by displaying amazing intelligence and fortitude in fighting with the goblins to get their fruits for Laura.

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