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**Psychological Make-Up and Gender Construct in Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market”**

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*Abstract*

The paper aims at exploring Victorian poet Christina Rossetti’s poem (1830-1894) “Goblin Market” (1862) through psychoanalytical and feminist perspectives. The poem which is an ostensible tale meant to be narrated to children, is actually on a deeper level, a thematically voluminous piece of literature from which a plethora of meanings emerge. What this poem demonstrates, holds true in the contemporary times. The objectives of this paper are to analyze 1) the poem with reference to studying gender as a construct, established by the patriarchal discourses, and also 2) the complexes that an individual might undergo owing to repression. The paper makes use of Luce Irigaray (b. 1930) and Helene Cixous’ (b. 1937) notions of feminism and Freud (1856-1939) and Lacan’s (1901-1981) theories of psychoanalysis. After explaining the relevant theory, the researchers aim to apply it to “Goblin Market” in order to compare and contrast the poem from the two said perspectives. Feminism helps in deconstructing the patriarchal overtones and power relationships whereas psychoanalysis enables the readers to understand the complexes and experiences that individuals undergo owing to their psychological make-up.

**Keywords:** Christina Rossetti, Goblin Market, Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Repression

**Introduction**

Christina Rossetti, an eminent Victorian writer, sister to Pre-Raphaelite poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), often explored themes of femininity, love, and societal expectations in her poems. While not overtly feminist in the modern sense, her works reflect a nuanced perspective on women’s roles. Rossetti acknowledged societal constraints but also celebrated inner strength

and resilience of her female characters, thus offering a subtle commentary on the limitations imposed on women. The psychological ramifications of her poems often delve into themes of love, loss, and the complexities of female identity within societal norms. In her poem “Maud Clare” (1862) a jilted lover confronts his new bride and raises concerns about the unequal treatment of women and the prevalence of double standards in Victorian society. Rossetti’s poem “In the Round Tower at Jhansi” (1862) recounts the tale of an actual Indian queen who spearheaded the uprising against British Colonial rule, thereby showcasing the fortitude and self-determination of women in the face of injustice. She articulates her observations about the society that she lives in and brings about a revolutionary poem “Goblin Market” (1862) which offers ample scope to be studied from feminist and psychoanalytical perspectives.

Rossetti’s writings reflect a deep preoccupation with the status of women in Victorian society, in consonance with the radical feminist views of her time. The themes, imagery and symbols in her poetry convey a discontent with the societal constraints placed on women in marriage, education and profession, echoing the sentiments expressed by prominent Victorian feminists. In essence, Christina Rossetti can be regarded as a leading proponent of women’s rights during the Victorian era. Despite not being associated with major feminist groups like the Langham Place Circle or the Kensington Society, and lacking any surviving explicit feminist writings, biographical evidence indicates that her constrained life contributed to the discontent shared by women of her generation and social standing. A comparison of the nineteenth century feminist philosophy with Christina Rossetti’s poetry shows that her works go beyond reflecting the era, actively addressing and critiquing the oppressive, sexist conditions faced by Victorian women. Although Christina Rossetti did not align herself with the feminist movement, her poetry resonates powerfully with feminist ideals, particularly addressing the economic oppression of women. The aim of this paper is to compare and contrast the poem from feminist and psychoanalytical perspectives in order to decode the underlying allegorical interpretations to extract the desired meaning.

### **Theoretical Background**

Though feminist theories and psychoanalysis are quite different from each other, these two theoretical fields of inquiry also have quite a few commonalities. The discourse of psychoanalysis has become a prime inspiration for Luce Irigaray’s work. Bearing a close resemblance to Helene

Cixous, Irigaray's writings are proactively concerned with the work of Lacan and combine psychoanalysis and feminism. In "This Sex Which is Not One" (1977), Irigaray argued that breaking free from phallogocentrism and patriarchy's influence on language is a gradual process, acknowledging that our writing and thinking are inherently shaped by these societal norms. She contends that women need to work like a virus "from within patriarchal discourses to infect and radically change them, thus leaving open the possibility of a different language" (72). In *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1977), she notes that western intellectual tradition has essentially marginalized the feminine and has analyzed the construct in relation to the masculine as the normative human identity. A pivotal concern of Irigaray is to understand the female subjectivity, and her refusal to permit the reduction of woman as the "other side" of man.

Cixous stresses upon the necessity of a woman's voice in her concept of *écriture* feminine as discussed in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975) and *The Newly Born Woman* (1975). She has called upon to include this practice of *écriture* feminine and "body-presence" in the theatre too which she observes is a product of narcissistic masculine fantasy. Cixous, instead of focusing on the difference between categories of "gender" and "sexual difference," emphasizes on the way sexual difference is "most clearly perceived at the level of *jouissance*" (83). For Cixous, the effective tool to deal with these diverse economies is through a resort to the theory of bisexuality. Bisexuality for Cixous was different from its conventional neutral meaning as it waved off castration. She describes bisexuality as "a fantasy of being complete which replaces the fear of castration" (84), and illustrates the same with Ovid's Hermaphrodite.' Secondly, she defines bisexuality as presence of both the sexes within oneself. Cixous contends that patriarchy is embedded within cultural and historical frameworks marked by power dynamics. In her analysis, she leverages Jacques Lacan's theoretical framework, aiming to interlink language, psyche and sexuality. This is manifested in the "Imaginary Phase," symbolizing the feminine mother and body, and the "Symbolic Order" which enforces the Law of the Father through language and sexual differentiation. This paper is based on the framework of feminism to fathom how Rossetti's "Goblin Market" encapsulates the concerns raised by feminist critics much later. In this sense, she is a poet ahead of her times.

Psychoanalysis as a theory offers a connection between mind and social order. The focal point is what Freud terms as 'id' or the unconscious. As per Freud's tripartite division of the mind,

thoughts, desires and memories, though largely inaccessible, influence our identity and behaviour. Freud explains the development of the unconscious having genesis in infancy or the time of birth which is why we are governed by what he calls as the 'pleasure principle.' Consequently, the infant seeks to obtain pleasure and her/his search for gratification of the physical desire centres around her/his own body. As the child grows up, he/she has to learn to overcome the desire for this gratification. The social conduct demands the child to repress her/his desire and be guided by the social decorum, which has been referred to by Freud as the 'reality principle.'

These repressed desires take place in the unconscious mind. Aggregation of too much repressed sexual energy may make the subject mentally ill or neurotic. Thus, Freud advocates psychoanalysis as a tool to access this repressed energy to cure mental illness. This 'talking cure' constitutes Freud's catharsis model, based on the classic notion of the theory of catharsis. The 'talking cure' is thus a process whereby neurosis/illness resulting from repressed energy is cured through verbal utterances. It is here that psychoanalysis and literary studies blend. A psychoanalyst, therefore, offers to read between the lines in order to decipher the hidden meanings of a text. A psychoanalytical analysis of "Goblin Market" lends richness to the poem which could be viewed from multiple perspectives.

### **Feminist Analysis of the Poem**

"Goblin Market" can be seen as a powerfully subversive text which exposes the discrimination on account of one's gender and sexuality. Facing the hardships of patriarchy, the two women Laura and Lizzie coil up and support each other. In their sisterly oneness of experience that they face in the form of oppression and atrocities by men, both realize that they must have an identity of their own. Laura represents the fallen woman to whom redemption is brought by Lizzie. Laura fails to check the temptations of goblin men and their calls to "come [and] buy" the juicy fruits that they sell at night. The patriarchal norms and uncontrollable sexual desire force women into prostitution. Jeannie, who has been raped and killed, lies silent in her grave on which even flowers do not bloom. She suffers the stigma of rape even after her death whereas the rapists continue to rape other women like Lizzie and Laura. Sisterhood enables Laura and Lizzie to uproot the enforced patriarchy and attain their identities, the tale of which they could tell their children. In this way, the poem is a harbinger of a new era that subverts the gender stereotypes and calls upon women to think afresh.

Rossetti also subverts the discourse of John Milton. Parallels can easily be drawn between Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* and Rossetti's "Goblin Market" wherein victims eat the 'forbidden fruit.' Milton's protagonists seek a place in paradise which they lose and gain. Rossetti's protagonists too lose and gain the paradise of sisterhood. The fallen protagonists in either case undergo redemption. Rossetti aiming at feminization of Milton/male discourse, presents Lizzie as a feminine version of Christ. Milton writes the epic in grand style whereas Rossetti subverts the linguistic style and writes in a style which is completely her own (unconventional rhyme scheme and meter) and may appear to men as childish, since it is different from theirs. An effective comparison can be made between Rossetti and Lizzie who after her encounter with goblin men cannot express herself in their words any more. Nor does she have her own words to supplant them. This is in line with the feminist view that women must possess a language of their own. Robin Lakoff in "Language and Woman's Place" also writes: "The marginality and powerlessness of women is reflected in both the ways women are expected to speak, and the ways in which women are spoken of" (45). There is no need to fit in and write in the same way as patriarchal discourses have defined for them. Dale Spender in her book *Man Made Language* (1980) also records how language has actually been used by male writers to control women and their destiny. Peter Barry also does not consider language as a neutral medium but argues that it has various features which "reflect its role as the instrument through which patriarchy finds expression" (121). Laura behaves normally unless she comes in contact with men, after which her behavior is labeled as abnormal; this echoes Gilbert and Gubar's view that women are declared hysterical by men if they try to do something of their own accord. The next day after Lizzie's encounter with goblin men, the sisters talk "as modest maidens should" (209). The goblin men call them "cross grained, uncivil" (395). Lizzie thereby discovers a language, different from men and later Laura develops her own discourse too. The feminist critics argue that literature from Milton to Freud relegated women to a position subordinate to men which disabled them to speak independently. Therefore, Rossetti subverts the Miltonic/male discourse. Janet Galligani Casey also endorses that the the role of the Redeemer is given to male in the Judeo-Christian tradition and this role eventually passed from theological sphere to the cultural sphere. So males being the savior,

females are relegated to the supporting role (Mary/Martha) or the role of the person in need of salvation (Eve). As Mary or Martha, the female fulfills the secondary function nurturing the male, the Christ figure. As Eve, the female is the archetypal "fallen woman" who,

contrasted to savior, the embodiment of spiritual love is traditionally associated with carnal love. Both female roles, of course, inferior to the role of the male. (Casey 63)

In accordance with the views expressed above, the Victorians also believed in such binary gendered roles as exemplified by Lizzie and Laura who look after hearth and home. They do not have any financial independence. In order to buy the things that they like, they have to sell their bodies. Laura pays the price of fruit with the lock of her hair, reminding of Alexander Pope's *Belinda*. In both the cases, sexuality is accessed through the lock of hair. Laura is tempted into sensual pleasure. Once she loses her virginity, her senses go numb and her behavior afterwards is likened to that of a prostitute. Rossetti must be referring to the practice of prostitution prevalent in the Victorian era which young girls were lured and forced into. Laura becomes the fallen woman who is restored to her original being by her sister Lizzie.

In the poem, an exclusively female discourse subverts an exclusively male discourse that has been prevalent so far. The two women Laura and Lizzie find homosexuality as an answer to patriarchy. Dorothy Mermin writes that the poem is about "the development of female autonomy in a largely female world . . . [It is a poem of] feminine freedom, heroism, and self-sufficiency and a celebration of sisterly and maternal love." (Mermin107-8). Rossetti breaks Cixous' male/female binaries which all other binaries lead to. Men make no physical appearance in the poem. In the end, Lizzie and Laura are shown to be mothers but there is no reference to their husbands. The two sisters are complete in themselves; they do not need males to be complete. There is a reference to wives, mothers and children; the father's world (patriarchy) has been completely erased. From Irigay's perspective this is a refusal to recognize women as the other side of men and in Cixous' way, this is recognition of both the sexes within a woman.

Therefore, in "Goblin Market," Christina Rossetti explores a predominantly female-centric realm, narrating a tale of an inseparable connection between two sisters. To begin, Rossetti's women face various forms of oppression, notably in economic and sexual aspects. Economically, the symbolism of buying and selling is evident, with the goblin men holding complete control over the market. They possess the goods, wield bargaining power and seemingly dominate the production of a highly desirable commodity. In contrast, Laura is in a precarious position. The goblin men excel at marketing their fruits, using enticing descriptions like "plump," "ripe," "bloom-down-cheeked," and presenting an alluring ad campaign with the persistent call, "come

buy, come buy.” Despite Laura’s longing and potential dependence on the fruits, she lacks the ability to purchase them with the local currency.

The scenario depicted by Rossetti in “Goblin Market” invites comparison with the economic plight of unmarried Victorian women. Their options were limited, with becoming a governess or tutor being a possibility if they had received formal education, a luxury mainly available to the wealthy. Lower-class women, lacking educational opportunities, often resorted to working as shop clerks for meager wages, and sadly, some found themselves compelled to turn to prostitution. In the poem, Rossetti explores this issue through Laura, portraying her as a character with strong indications of engaging in prostitution. The exchange of her body for goods is unmistakable, and the buying and selling of fruit serves as a metaphor for sexual transactions, with vivid imagery linking specific fruits to intimate acts.

In illustrating the dire circumstances experienced by unmarried Victorian women through Laura, Rossetti contrasts this with a positive alternative in the character of Lizzie. The fact that Rossetti goes beyond addressing oppression and provides constructive solution positions, makes “Goblin Market” a radical feminist statement, significantly ahead of its time.

Viewed through a feminist lens, “Goblin Market” can be interpreted as a layered allegory where the Christian allegory serves as a framework for a more focused feminist allegory. Rossetti portrays an idealized community of women in the text, emphasizing their absolute influence over the day-to-day happenings.

### **Psychoanalytic Interpretation of the Poem**

Psychoanalytic critics may look at “Goblin Market” from various angles. In one way, it can be seen as a fragmented-self moving towards a psychological integration: Laura and Lizzie being a divided-mind of a single person. The poem is a narrative about two “doppelgangers”, as Otto Rank would call them, Rossetti employs vivid imagery, describing Laura and Lizzie as intertwined entities, suggesting a unity between them. This connection is established early in the poem (line 184-198), as depicted by “Golden head by golden head, Like two pigeons in one nest.” The phrase “Lock'd together in one nest” underscores an inseparable bond, with their proximity expressed as “cheek to cheek and breast to breast.” The metaphorical use of ‘nest’ implies a shared existence,

whether in body or mind. So, the connection between the two doppelgangers besides being physical is also ethereal, psychological and complex.

“Goblin Market” epitomizes the Freudian themes of *eros* and *thanatos*. The poem presents a battle of *eros* (life instinct) and *thanatos* (death instinct). *Eros* which is responsible for sustaining the life of an individual is represented by Lizzie whereas Laura embodies *thanatos* which is an unconscious desire to die. It is the life instinct that tempers with the unconscious death instinct and brings about a harmony in the poem by restoration of Laura’s original being and psychological integration of the two selves. So, the poem can be seen as a microcosm of the unknown domain of the human mind.

The poem can also be viewed in contrast to Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. Unlike Milton’s serpent, Laura is tempted by her instinct. She eats the forbidden fruit resulting in her suffering. It is her libido that causes her fall. Additionally, as noted earlier, the poem falls under the domain of Freud’s tripartite concept of id, ego and superego. The id seeks pleasure without considering consequences, while the ego translates id’s desires into reality. The superego, at the id’s extreme, uses guilt to uphold societal rules. Initially portrayed as pure and innocent, Hebrew origin of Lizzie’s name, meaning “God’s oath,” associates her with religious piety. Lizzie resists temptation by dulling her senses, veiling her blushes, covering her eyes and blocking her ears when confronted by the goblin men. Despite recognizing the allure, she refrains from succumbing to their calls, considering them evil and foreseeing perilous consequences. Functioning as the conscience, Lizzie serves as a moral guide for Laura, cautioning her against the goblins. Acting like the superego, she plays a maternal role, advising against late ventures and warning about the fate of Jeannie, who yielded to temptation. Lizzie employs guilt to suppress Laura’s urges, resembling the superego’s essential characteristics. Laura’s libido drives her to meet goblin men and crave for an encounter with them again. It is Lizzie who makes Laura aware of the fate that she might undergo. With the help of Jeannie’s example, she tries to awaken Laura’s conscience to assess the reality of the external world and act accordingly in a socially acceptable way.

The poem can also be seen as a journey from ‘pleasure principle’ to ‘reality principle.’ The poem is not a narrative about renunciation of sexual desire but a journey from socially unacceptable lust to socially desirable marriage. The uncanny presence of goblin men, their physical absence and their eerie calls interest Freudian critics. Laura is a personification of



psychosis. Lizzie represents normalcy and Laura stands for disorder, mental illness and depression. A Lacanian analysis exposes the poem to be a narrative about repression of sexuality (pleasure principle) which has resulted in Laura's illness. Laura withdraws from reality into the illusion of goblin. Lizzie re-enacts the goblin experience and 'talk cures' Laura of her psychosis.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" emerges as a multifaceted work that invites both feminist and psychoanalytic interpretations. Through a feminist lens, the poem boldly confronts patriarchal norms, highlighting the economic and sexual oppression faced by women in the Victorian age. The sisterly bond between Laura and Lizzie becomes a powerful force for resistance, subverting traditional gender roles and challenging the male-dominated discourse of the time. Rossetti skillfully weaves a narrative that does not only expose the hardships imposed by patriarchy but also envisions a realm where women can achieve autonomy and redefine their identities.

On the psychoanalytic front, the poem delves into the intricacies of the human psyche, embodying Freudian themes of *eros* and *thanatos*. Laura and Lizzie represent a fragmented self, engaged in a psychological battle between life and death instincts. The poem can be seen as a microcosm of the human mind, exploring the interplay of id, ego, and superego. Laura's journey from the pleasure principle to the reality principle reflects a nuanced exploration of sexuality and societal expectations.

Therefore, "Goblin Market" stands as a pioneering work that transcends traditional boundaries, offering a rich collage for feminist and psychoanalytic scholars alike. Rossetti's significant portrayal of female autonomy, sisterhood and psychological complexities makes the poem a timeless exploration of the human experience.

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