

Anti-Fairy Tale Traits in ‘Goblin Market’: Rossetti’s Quest for a Brave New World

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Abstract: *Christina Rossetti’s seminal work ‘Goblin Market’, at its first reading seems to be a fairy tale written in verse. However, when read minutely, it appears that while the poem has a number of fairy tale elements in it, on the other hand, it does not also fulfill many fairy tale conventions. It might well be said that the poet deliberately makes certain changes to the conventions in order to raise a feminist attitude to empower women living in a society, full of traps set by the lust of men. Therefore, it would be justified to term the poem as an anti-fairy tale. In this article we will be discussing the general traits of the poem from this point of view.*

Key Words: *Feminism, Fairytale, Anti-fairytale, Goblin Market.*

“Days, weeks, months, years
Afterwards, when both were wives
With children of their own;

...

Laura would call the little ones
And tell them of her early prime,
Those pleasant days long gone
Of not returning time:”

_Christina G. Rossetti,
‘Goblin Market’

At its first reading Christina Rossetti’s colourful narrative poem ‘Goblin Market’ appears to be a fairy tale. There is a presence of supernatural – the goblins in the poem. Even the language is fairy tale like; the lines are simple, rhyming and at times repetitive that introduces a form of story-telling. There are also very clear instructions or morals in the poem that is another feature of many fairy tales. ‘Goblin Market’ tells a story of two sisters,

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Lizzie and Laura who used to live in a fairy tale cottage. Every morning and evening these “maids heard the goblins cry”. These animal-like goblin men tempted the maidens with their gamut of ripe and fresh fruits. The sensible Lizzie resisted the temptation but her more gullible sister Laura could not control herself; she purchased the ‘goblin fruits’ from the merchant goblin men with a lock of her golden hair and tasted them. But here she was tricked by the sinister curse – whoever will taste the goblin fruits once, will long to taste them again but find them no more, they will pine, repent and turn ‘grey’. Finally Lizzie goes out herself to the market place to save her sister. Lizzie resisted the attacks and abuses of the wicked men and at last wins the ‘fiery antidote’ – the pulp of the goblin fruits, which would restore the life of Laura. Laura is rehabilitated from her ‘dwindling’ state to a young virginal maiden. The poem ends with a married Laura recollecting her story to her young children.

‘Goblin Market’ was written in a decade that produced a large number of literary and artistic representations of fairy worlds. Popularity of fairy stories increased following the translations of the Grimm’s Tales and Anderson’s Tales. Victorian readers responded positively and energetically to the characteristic blend of morality and fantasy offered by such texts. Though Rossetti introduces fairy tale features in her poem ‘Goblin Market’, it fails to fulfill the traditional fairy tale norms and demands. Rossetti brings the elements of a fairy story but finally treats them at her own terms.

The beautiful images, themes and language, along with the ‘supernatural machinery’ in ‘Goblin Market’ led the daily ‘Spectator’ to declare it as ‘a true children’s poem’ (Marsh, Jan. Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography. London: Jonathan Cape, 1994. Print. P.282). Though the paper also focused on the themes of temptation, sexuality, transgression and redemption that are suitable for adults only. In a letter to the publisher of the volume ‘Goblin Market and other poems’, Rossetti herself has commented that this poem was not essentially written for children; she claimed, “children are not among my suggestive subjects” (Harrison, G. Antony H. The Letters of Christina Rossetti, Vol. 1. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997. Print. P.159). The poet intentionally chooses the fairy tale background to deal with more serious issues. Thus, it will be fair enough to treat ‘Goblin Market’ not as a fairy tale but as an anti-fairy tale that reconstructs the forms and norms of a fairy tale to fulfill its own purposes. The Oxford English Dictionary describes the meaning of the prefix ‘anti’ as “opposed to; against; preventing” or “relieving” or “the opposite of”. Therefore, an ‘anti-fairy tale’ or ‘anti-tale’ is an outward opposition to the traditional form itself. It takes aspects of the fairy tale genre and re-imagines, subverts, inverts or deconstructs the elements of them to present an alternate narrative interpretation, outcome or morality.

Fairy stories were mainly written with a purpose – they were meant to educate and put

forth ideal behaviours for children, both male and female. But while the boys were taught by these stories to be chivalric, courageous and strong (both physically and emotionally) just like the conventional heroes, girls got an entirely different message from these tales. They were expected to be morale, kind and generous, forgiving and full of patience, passive and as gentle as possible. In Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' though Laura is frail and gentle as any other female protagonist of a fairy tale, Lizzie is strong and protective of her sister. Lizzie possesses qualities that are hardly expected from a fairy tale female character. She is full of active energies and intelligence that are traditionally found in a 'male hero'. She is bold enough to face the goblins and resist their attacks and abuses, while Laura falls prey to their traps.

Moreover, fairy tales also intended to teach young girls about the ideals of self-sacrifice, obedience and submissiveness. Breaking of any rules or boundaries and disobeying of elders' teachings, orders or prohibitions were punishable offence. When Jeanie or Laura, thus, does not listen to the prohibition – (You)“must not look at goblin men”, “must not buy their fruits”, they had to suffer from the goblin curse, they got old and 'grey'. This same theme can be found also in a Bengali fairy story about two sisters, Sukhu and Dukhu, in the collection, 'Thakumar Jhuli'. While the gentle and docile Dukhu obeys all the instructions of the fairy godmother, 'Chander Maa Buri', and does everything as she was told, she becomes more beautiful, get married to a prince and the days of her sorrow come to an end. Thus was the reward for her obedience. But Sukhu, who was gluttonous, does not follow the instructions properly and denies being submissive. She was thus cursed by the same fairy godmother – she became ugly in features and was eaten by a python as punishment.

Fairy stories often have an idea of growing up. The protagonist undergoes certain adventurous experiences and emerges as mentally changed or matured in some way. In 'Goblin Market' Laura has a kind of adventurous experience – she eats the forbidden fruits and grows older afterwards. But this maturity is entirely different as she does not gain any knowledge or wisdom in this way. The change appears only in her bodily form. Thus, the fruit only damages her. The maturing process is also not fulfilled in Lizzie's case. Lizzie manages not to eat the goblin fruits and thus was saved from the aftermath. So, in 'Goblin Market' adventures do not cause beneficial growth to the protagonist, rather the actual adventure occurs when Lizzie succeeds in saving Laura's youth.

In every traditional fairy story, be it the story of Cinderella, Rapunzel, Snow white or even Coleridge's Christabel, we always find two contrasting female characters – one is the 'angel in the house' or the aesthetic ideal, and the other the 'witch' or 'monster' in the house – the angel's necessary opposite and double. In this respect the 'witch' is the alter-ego of the angel; she is everything the 'angel' is not. According to the Freudian critics, the former is the latter's 'type of the unconscious', whom the Jungian critics would like to describe as the 'shadow' and the Romantics as the 'specter'. The witch-like stepmothers

of Cinderella and Snow White becomes the daughter's alter-ego. The virginal beauty of the daughters arouses jealousy and revengefulness in the minds of the 'wicked' mothers. Carl Jung defines the 'good mother' and the 'wicked mother' in these stories. In most of the fairy tales the young daughters are motherless; the 'good mother' is thus substituted by the 'wicked' stepmother. Capitalising upon the innocence of the daughter's mind, the 'wicked mother' becomes able to victimize her. But a question occurs here – why does the 'mother' hate the daughter so much? In their work 'The Madwoman in the Attic' Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar writes, "The traditional explanation – that the mother is as threatened by her daughter's 'budding sexuality' as the daughter is by the mother's 'possession' of the father – is helpful but does not seem entirely adequate, considering the depth and ferocity of the Queen's rage." Gilbert and Gubar criticize the general notion that, this hatred in the mother for her daughter is a result of 'female vulnerability' as 'female bonding is extraordinarily difficult in patriarchy' (Gilbert, Sandra M., Gubar, Susan. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1979. Print. P.38). The wicked stepmother of Snow White starts hating her from the day when the former questions her 'magic looking glass', representative of male gaze – "Who's the fairest of them all?", and the glass shows the reflection of Snow White instead of that of her stepmother. It is as if the daughter is destined to replace the mother (therefore to be hated by her as well) and find her own place in the male-dominated society. It is thus like a competition between the two.

However, Christina Rossetti perhaps was trying to overcome this tension – the difficulty. Thus, her 'Goblin Market' does not follow this fairy tale convention. There is no place for competition or jealousy between the two female characters, Lizzie and Laura. Rather, they complement and fulfill each other. These two girls are described as –

"Golden head by golden head,
Like two pigeons in one nest

...

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."

Besides, when Laura is cursed after eating the goblin fruits, with her hair growing 'thin and grey' and her 'tree of life' drooping 'from the root', it is her sister Lizzie who comes forward to save her. She goes out herself to the goblin market and encounters the maulings and mockings of the goblins. Ultimately Lizzie succeeds in saving Laura's life. In this way Lizzie also takes the place of the 'hero' in the fairy tales. In the traditional fairy tales often a male hero comes out to save the distressed female protagonist. A certain 'Prince charming'

wakes Snow White up from her death-like sleep by kissing her, another prince rescues Rapunzel from her confinement on the tower made by a witch, and Cinderella was also saved from the ill-treatments of her stepmother and stepsisters by marrying a certain prince. This conventional male 'saviour', in Rossetti's imagination, is replaced by a 'female hero'. W. Glasgow Phillips says in his essay 'Themes in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*', "So what we are left with is this: a woman performed a heroic, self-sacrificing action, certainly related to Christ's sacrifice of himself, to save her sister... She is forced to offer herself up to goblin abuse (physical, sexual goblin abuse) to perform a positive action".

The theme of marriage plays a vital role in traditional fairy tales. These stories are constructed by male voices – so, female characters are sketched as men wanted them to see. In fairy stories women are always polarized – either they are wicked and scheming, or they are beauteous and innocent. While the wicked ones wanted always to be appealing in male gaze, the innocent ones tried to find security in marriage. It is as if the girls were to wait for some prince to come and marry them. This prince or hero was often the 'saviour' only who could complete the existence of these girls in society. Although, in case of 'Beauty and the Beast' the design is a little different. The young female protagonist Beauty was though confined by the animal-like Beast, she eventually falls in love with him. It is through her workings that the cursed Beast gets back his original human form. The Beast then marries beauty and they lived 'happily ever after'. Though unlike the other stories, here the saviour is the heroine but still she has to fall in love and marry an animal-like creature, who was even her captivator, to secure her place in society. In 'Goblin Market' Rossetti does not follow this convention. Laura was saved by her sister Lizzie, though certainly she does not 'fall in love' with her or marries her. As it is described in the poem, in later years both the sisters were married differently, but their husbands remain insignificant throughout the poem. The sisters could defend themselves – they did not need any male saviour to do that for them. They even did not need any man to fulfill them.

It is surprising to notice at this point that male characters are entirely absent from Rossetti's fairy world. The two maids live in a cottage by their own, without any male guardian or protector. The world is completely 'woman centric' – a women's world. Even when both Laura and Lizzie become wives and mothers, their husbands remain conspicuously absent. In this feminine world, the women live in peaceful security under the wings of sisterhood. Thus, Laura tells her daughters –

"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."

In Rossetti's vision, even the natural objects adopt feminine attributes-

"The stars rise, the moon bends *her* arc
Each glow-worm winks *her* spark." (Italics mine)

In this poem Rossetti clearly divides the world into two halves – the natural and domestic world inhabited by innocent maidens (or women), and the mercantile world possessed by cunning goblin men. While the maidens 'must not look at goblin men,' 'must not buy their fruits' and they confine themselves in their own secured world, the sly goblins easily enter the feminine world and lurks in search of prey.

In Rossetti's fairytale (or anti fairytale?) thus, the conventional ominous witch, ever-present in fairy stories, is substituted by the goblin 'men'. Here the source of a woman's despair is not another woman, but it is 'men'. On the other hand, the saviour is not a conventional male hero. That very role is played by a maiden. In Rossetti's world women bask in the blissful idea of sisterhood – they help each other, love each other, and protect each other. They need neither a fatherly king nor a 'Prince charming' to fulfill them.

However, it will not be fair enough to analyse 'Goblin Market' as only an anti-fairytale narrative, but the readers must find out why did Rossetti use the form of fairy tale but does not follow the traditional norms. Christina Rossetti deliberately chose the hiding mask of a fairy tale to deliver her 'feminist cry' in search of a women's world. Frances Thomas, thus, muses, "Christina has hidden herself away and we have to tease her out from the shadows and hiding places." (Thomas, Frances. Christina Rossetti. London: Virago Press Ltd., 1994. Print. P.381).

Christina Rossetti was writing at a time when the middle-class English women were deprived of all active power (economic, political and educational), they were imprisoned on an ivory tower, supposed to play the role of the 'angel in the house'. They were the idols of self-sacrifice and self-denial. Jan Marsh writes, "Self- control was, quintessentially, a feminine lesson: for more than their brothers, girls were taught to suppress desire and ambition, told that wishing and wanting were greedy and selfish, and schooled to internalize the values of denial and docility." Even to the young Christina, her family members and especially her mother, Frances Mary Lavinia Rossetti, who was according to Christina's brother William Michael Rossetti, 'the most womanly of women' (Marsh,

Jan. Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography. London: Jonathan Cape, 1994. Print. P.13), had set an example of correct womanly conduct. For Christina it was a 'lifelong practice of moderating self-control'. However, it is noteworthy that even though in Christina's 'Goblin Market' Lizzie repeatedly reminds her sister – "We must not buy their fruits" and "Laura, Laura / You should not peep at goblin men", the "Curious Laura chose to linger / Wondering at each merchant man." She goes on saying, "Look, Lizzie, look, Lizzie, / Down the tramp little men". The voice of these men seems to her as 'kind and full of loves'. Here, through Laura's words and actions Rossetti gives expression to the suppressed desires of women in the male-dominated Victorian society. Patriarchal domination and power politics were at the forefront of this society. Everywhere the sly 'goblin men' were waiting to trap and exploit helpless Lauras and Jeanies. Therefore, the Victorian women intellectuals had to find out a better place for their own, that would be free from the patriarchal power game of domination and subordination, the game played between oppressors and oppressed, victimizers and victimized. It was better for them to try and find out comfort and support in the company of the 'same sex' when the 'opposite sex' was literally in opposition.

Some of our modern critics find homosexual connotations in 'Goblin Market'. According to them, the sleeping scene of Laura and Lizzie depicts homosexuality –

"Folded in each other's wings,
They lay down in their curtained bed

...

Cheek to cheek and breast to breast
Locked together in one nest."

Furthermore, Lizzie's words, "Laura"... "Did you miss me? / Come and kiss me. / ... Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices" establish the claim. These scenes represent same-sex incestuous desires and activities. However, at the end of the poem, Laura's preaching of her ideologies about sisterhood and both the girls' becoming 'wives' and 'mothers' challenge their supposed homosexual orientation and dismantle the above claim. The closeness between the two girls mirrors their inter-dependence.

Christina Rossetti, like her other contemporary women poets such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Dickinson, tried to reject the male domination in society. These Victorian women poets wanted to identify themselves (as do the female characters in Rossetti's 'Goblin Market') as a part of a community of women. Their poems reflect a 'homosocial' world of women where strong and supportive relations among mothers and daughters, sisters and friends do exist. In 'Goblin Market' Laura's ideologies of sisterhood echoes the Victorian women's cry for this 'homosocial' world. Complete exclusion of men from the fairy tale world further foreshadows Rossetti's search for the long awaited 'Brave New World' for women.

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