



Problematic Treatment of Womanhood in Rossetti's Poems: A Critical Study

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Abstract

The literary works by Christina Rossetti portray the plight of Victorian women. In her poems 'From the Antique' and 'Goblin Market', we come across how her own works are contradictory to each other. With a psychoanalytic and feminist theoretical framework, this essay will attempt to study the problematic representation and treatment of womanhood in poems by Christina Rossetti, namely, 'From the Antique' and 'Goblin Market'. It would also reflect on how the Victorian Era itself marked a contradiction between faith and doubt, which is reflected in the contradictoriness in Rossetti's life and her works.

Keywords: Poetry; Religion; Dichotomy; Unconscious; Sexual; Victorian women; Feminism

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Introduction

There is difficulty in presenting the presence of thematic uniformity in Rossetti's poetry. Always being in a moral dilemma, as can be seen, while the two poems are compared and read, she is between her strong religious fanaticism and the want of death. As Jerome J. McGann in his journal *The Religious Poetry of Christina Rossetti* mentions, "Such qualities were associated with the presence of a central conflict or paradox which seemed to define the very nature of the poet and poetry itself [1].

Troubled by an extremely fragmentary feeling, on the one hand, her religious poems have a sense of personal devotional emotion, and while the remaining ones are silent poems that appeal limited to the writer or/and even the readers of her poetry; inclination to the sickening of sentiments and life. "Rossetti's art is fueled by two broader formal traditions: the secular love lyric, which includes the song and the complaint, and the devotional lyric, which includes the prayer and the hymn" [2]. She was a poet of the Victorian Era - the Age of Doubts, which influences the very dilemma in her poetry and life. The poetry she composes may as well be her attitude toward life.

"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."

Goblin Market can be seen as a feminist manifesto, there is a sense of power and agency of their own - Laura & Lizzie; can be seen as an "exploration of sexual temptation." This poem is a narrative of Victorian sexual repression - it highlights the intense "fear of female sexuality and its potential consequences" showing sexual politics by applying the moral reading of the "non-religious, fairy tale narrative" [3]. This fear played an impactful role in Rossetti's life, as it would in any other woman's life, her exposure to ardent devotion to religiosity almost at the same period as her time of rejecting marriage proposals. The Goblin Market can be understood as a prototypical kind of symbolic exegesis that Rossetti wanted her readers to engage in - the romantic and matrimonial illusions are criticized by "Goblin Market". "Desire is not, for Rossetti, a moral or even an aesthetic solution; it is a moral nonsense" [4].

The ill effects Laura went through after consuming the fruits does make the fruit seem Evil here, but this can be contradicted by how Lizzie dealt with the goblin sellers with a motive of self-sacrifice and got the cure, rather than the poison, from the very fruit that seemed evil when Laura consumed it by going against her conscience. This contradiction might show that Rossetti supposed that all the things in this world can be presented as morally meaningful. Simon Humphries interprets this as "the things of the

world are good when used rightly" [5]. As depicted in the poem, the indulgence in sexual desire as an illness/addiction leading to even death is directly related to an experience and understanding of ill health and Christina herself had illness as a ubiquitous part of her life. One of her friends had breast cancer; she had the intention to show the power of sisterhood/friendship. Another reading of it can be of her sister Maria Francesca Rossetti, whom she always regarded with "admiring reverence", she had once stopped Christina from committing an elopement and that is how she is usually interpreted as Lizzie. As quoted from Edmund Gosse's observations by Mary Sandars, "The influence of Maria Francesca Rossetti on her sister seemed to be like that of Newton on Cowper, a species of police surveillance exercised by a hard convinced mind over a softer and more fanciful one [6].

"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."

As Lacan states, "The unconscious is the discourse of the other", the idea of our desire being the desire of the other, the unconscious part of ourselves. The poem *Goblin Market* opens with a sensuous call by the goblin men for the exotic fruits to young women, how her poem "presents an explicitly articulated image of a marketplace in which female "appetite" is at stake" [7]. The way female sexual appetite is presented in the poem, showing the fruits of the men in a sensuous manner, there is a presence of sexual connotation, which might be interpreted as an innate desire within. Indeed, Lacan elaborates that the desire we have is not even our own, it's always to a secondary degree as a track to adjust or accept things desirable by the Other, and this influence results in the merging, or rather, the becoming of the desire of the Other as our own.

Rossetti was raised in a religious household and spent seven years volunteering at a religious facility when his brother took charge of their home. She has an enormous number of religious poems, which are the reflection of her intense religiosity; as Sharon Smulders said she wrote "six volumes of devotional prose, two collections of fiction, and [a] juvenile novella," but her popularity "rests largely on 'Goblin Market' and a few short, melancholy lyrics.", as her religious poems extend more of her poetic intensity [8, 9].

Right after the death of her father, she had to hire herself for a job as there was a desperate need for money in the family, but she could not live through the ill effects of the work and left it. Even before that, she was used to being left at home to take care of her ill, depressed father. As a young woman, it would have been a difficult phase of life. This would have affected her views on subjects like sexuality (taboo at that age), marriage, religious enterprises, and so on, as visible through her works. The option left was marriage, but the idea of marriage she got from her mother did not influence her well enough. She rejected two marriage proposals as the men could not conform to the beliefs and philosophy of the Anglican Church. Christina died an

ugly death, she was constantly having hallucinations and was tormented by religious confusions; she used to have "hysterical turns" a common "disease" that Victorian women used to have. Her growing old and increase in illness influenced her perspective on life, she felt closer to death. Some of Rossetti's poetry was about the despair of life and had frequent concerns with death and dying.

Janet Dunbar in her book *The Early Victorian Woman writes*

"Since getting a husband was the only way of becoming respectably settled in life, a girl had to try to reach an ideal of feminine perfection. That ideal was laid down by men, and writers like Mrs. Ellis made it quite clear what was expected: softness and weakness, delicacy and modesty, a small waist and curving shoulders, an endearing ignorance of everything that went on beyond household and social life [10-13].

The above description is apt for Victorian traditions and it is insulting to any woman's sensibility and individuality. "From the *Antique*" is one powerful example where she was not rejoicing the womanhood but rather feeling the unlock of being born as a woman in the Victorian Era.

"It's a weary life, it is, she said:

Doubly blank in a woman's lot:

I wish and I wish I were a man:

Or, better than any being, were not:"

The way she writes depicts the plight of every Victorian woman; one who had no agency or importance of her own. She is either the angel in the house and if she violates a single rule from the set notions of womanhood in the Victorian tradition, she is regarded as the mad woman in the attic. In the Victorian era, we understand the condition of Victorian womanhood; they had the only role to provide for their husbands trapped by convention. This poem contemplates the tiredness of being a woman, her suicidal thoughts overpowering her faith. The poem speaks of a religious crisis. Christina Rossetti was a High Church Anglican, and suicide in Christianity is considered a sin, suggesting her skeptical time with religion. The very line, "I wish and I wish I were a man, strips off Christina of the feminist image she got in the *Goblin Market*. The idea here falls into the tropes of phallogocentric that patriarchy exhibits, the moment a woman considers themselves as "The Second Sex". A woman has always occupied a secondary position to men, being downgraded to the position of the "other", as a secondary, as says Simone de Beauvoir. She strongly asserted that women need to choose their own ways and are equally capable as men, as she stated "One is not born a Woman, But Becomes One" by the constructing nature of society. Another feminist, Luce Irigaray, argues about the presence of binaries, such as how women have been set as the secondary "other" of men - lack of phallus.

Fredegond Shove presented the dichotomy in the Rossetti family, Christina being a part of it; it is about her as well

"Undoubtedly the charm of this family consisted greatly in a

subtle blending of Italian with English beauty. All had the full lips, dreaming eyes, broad brows, and pale olive complexion now associated with so many of Dante Rossetti's pictures. In their family life there was a blending, too, of the greatly differing, strangely harmonizing notes; Italian music of speech (Christina's voice and pronunciation being quite especially melodious), English reserve and depth of strong feeling; Italian sympathy for saints and their works, English love of open-air (though never sport), country life and quiet; Italian intellectual precocity, English fun and sensibility to others' feelings; Italian seriousness and English childlike humor; lastly, Italian family devotion, fervent, exclusive, and not unegoistic, and then English love of fair play, with devotion to animals of all kinds." [14, 15].

The paradox is deep-rooted. She accepted the "pervasive myth of the woman poet as fitfully inspired, sincere and sad, too sensitive

for real life", meanwhile she is herself a "most calculatingly self-inventing and self-mythologizing" poet of all times [16, 17].

This paper investigates how Christina seems to be contradictory in her life as well as her poetry. Some of the poems by Christina Rossetti didn't portray a strong woman character and some of them had a feminist purpose, as her contradictory life can be traced in the chasm of her poetry. Her poetry is about opposites; when some poems are secular and on religious teachings, others are concerning subjects like duty, death, life, and love: a combination of internal religious conflicts and the expression of femininity. In a way, all of her poetry can be seen as an effort to use language to get past the fundamental segments that riddled her life and so profoundly affected her sense of style. This dichotomy in her works is a reflection of the dichotomies in her own life, as was conditioned by the dichotomies of the Age in which she was writing [18-26].

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