
UNIT 3 CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

Structure

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be familiar with:

- the life and times of Christina Rossetti
- the poem ‘Goblin Market’

3.1 INTRODUCTION

When you initially take a look at the poem ‘Goblin Market’ you may be concerned by its length. It’s almost 570 lines long! But we assure you that even though the length may seem to be formidable — the subject matter is simple and very easy to understand. In fact it reads like a children’s story and makes for a delightful reading. I can assure you that you will be mesmerized by the poem even in your first reading. Of course it does have a deeper meaning as well—like all good literary pieces. We will discuss that in our analysis of the poem.

To begin with let us take a look at the life events of the poetess and the times she lived in. These as we have already mentioned in our previous Units are very important to understand the work of a writer.

3.2 CHRISTINA ROSSETTI: LIFE AND WORKS

Christina Georgina Rossetti, pseudonym Ellen Alleyne (b. 1830—1894) was one of the most important nineteenth century English Pre-Raphaelite women poets, both in range and quality. Christina was the youngest child of Gabriele Rossetti and was the sister of the painter-poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti. In 1847 her grandfather Gaetano Polidori, printed on his private press a volume of her verses in which signs of poetic talent were already visible. In 1850, under the pseudonym Ellen Alleyne, she contributed seven poems to the *The Germ*. In 1853, when the Rossetti family was in financial difficulties, Christina helped her mother keep a school at Frome, Somerset, but it was not a success, and in 1854 the pair returned to London, where Christina’s father died. In straitened circumstances, Christina entered on her life work of companionship to her mother, devotion to her religion, and the writing of her poetry. She was a firm High Church Anglican, and in 1850 she broke her engagement to the artist James Collinson, because he had

become a Roman Catholic. For similar reasons she rejected Charles Bagot Cayley, though a warm friendship remained between them.

In 1862 Christina Rossetti published *Goblin Market and Other Poems* and in 1866 *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems*, both with frontispiece and decorations by her brother Dante Gabriel. These two collections, which contain most of her finest work, established her among the poets of her day.

In 1871 Christina was stricken by Graves' disease, a thyroid disorder that marred her appearance and left her life in danger. She accepted her affliction with courage and resignation, sustained by religious faith, and she continued to publish, issuing one collection of poems in 1875 and *A Pageant and Other Poems* in 1881. But after the onset of her illness she mostly concentrated on devotional prose writings. *Time Flies* (1885): a reading diary of mixed verse and prose, is the most personal of these works. Christina was considered a possible successor to Lord Alfred Tennyson as poet laureate, but she developed a fatal cancer in 1891. *New Poems* (1896), published by her brother, contained unprinted and previously uncollected poems.

Though she was haunted by an ideal of spiritual purity that demanded self-denial, Christina resembled her brother Dante Gabriel in certain ways, for beneath her humility, her devotion, and her quiet, saint-like life lay a passionate and sensuous temperament, a keen critical perception, and a lively sense of humour. Part of her success as a poet arises from the fact that she apparently succeeded in uniting these two seemingly contradictory sides of her nature. There is a vein of the sentimental and didactic in her weaker verse, but at its best her poetry is strong, personal, and unforced, with a metrical cadence that is unmistakably her own. The transience of material things is a theme that recurs throughout her poetry, and the resigned but passionate sadness of unhappy love is often a dominant note.

While looking at Christina Rossetti's poetry, one must keep certain factors in mind. In the first place, it is important to remember that in the nineteenth-century Victorian Age there were several repressive forces constantly operating on women. Women were not supposed to be opinionated. They were conventionally required to simply conform to the male line of thought. Christina Rossetti was gifted with a sharp intelligent mind but the keenness of her mind was suppressed by the pressures of social propriety. She lived a more or less sheltered life with little contact with the world outside except through her brothers and their bohemian friends. Above all, what governed her actions throughout her life was her deep religious belief.

3.3 'GOBLIN MARKET'

'Goblin Market' is Christina Rossetti's best known poem. Unfortunately it is only in recent decades that it has received the attention it deserves. Formerly it was generally relegated to the children's literature or fantasy literature category. The reason for its neglect was partly because its' main characters are two young girls and partly because Christina Rossetti's talents remained undiscovered until she was resurrected by contemporary female critics.

3.3.1 Poem

Goblin Market

Morning and evening
Maids heard the goblins cry:
“Come buy our orchard fruits,
Come buy, come buy:
Apples and quinces,
Lemons and oranges,
Plump unpecked cherries,
Melons and raspberries,
Bloom-down-cheeked peaches,
Swart-headed mulberries,
Wild free-born cranberries,
Crab-apples, dewberries,
Pine-apples, blackberries,
Apricots, strawberries;—
All ripe together
In summer weather,—
Morns that pass by,
Fair eves that fly;
Come buy, come buy:
Our grapes fresh from the vine,
Pomegranates full and fine,
Dates and sharp bullaces,
Rare pears and greengages,
Damsons and bilberries,
Taste them and try:
Currants and gooseberries,
Bright-fire-like barberries,
Figs to fill your mouth,
Citrons from the South,
Sweet to tongue and sound to eye;
Come buy, come buy.”

Evening by evening
Among the brookside rushes,
Laura bowed her head to hear,
Lizzie veiled her blushes:
Crouching close together
In the cooling weather,
With clasping arms and cautioning lips,
With tingling cheeks and finger tips.
“Lie close,” Laura said,

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Pricking up her golden head:

“We must not look at goblin men,
We must not buy their fruits:
Who knows upon what soil they fed
Their hungry thirsty roots?”
“Come buy,” call the goblins
Hobbling down the glen.

“Oh,” cried Lizzie, “Laura, Laura,
You should not peep at goblin men.”
Lizzie covered up her eyes,
Covered close lest they should look;
Laura reared her glossy head,
And whispered like the restless brook:

“Look, Lizzie, look, Lizzie,
Down the glen tramp little men.

One hauls a basket,
One bears a plate,
One lugs a golden dish
Of many pounds weight.

How fair the vine must grow
Whose grapes are so luscious;
How warm the wind must blow
Through those fruit bushes.”

“No,” said Lizzie, “No, no, no;
Their offers should not charm us,
Their evil gifts would harm us.”

She thrust a dimpled finger
In each ear, shut eyes and ran:
Curious Laura chose to linger
Wondering at each merchant man.

One had a cat’s face,
One whisked a tail,
One tramped at a rat’s pace,
One crawled like a snail,
One like a wombat prowled obtuse and furry,
One like a ratel tumbled hurry skurry.

She heard a voice like voice of doves
Cooing all together:

They sounded kind and full of loves
In the pleasant weather.

Laura stretched her gleaming neck
Like a rush-imbedded swan,

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Like a lily from the beck,
Like a moonlit poplar branch,
Like a vessel at the launch
When its last restraint is gone.

Backwards up the mossy glen
Turned and trooped the goblin men,
With their shrill repeated cry,
“Come buy, come buy.”
When they reached where Laura was
They stood stock still upon the moss,
Leering at each other,
Brother with queer brother;
Signalling each other,
Brother with sly brother.

One set his basket down,
One reared his plate;
One began to weave a crown
Of tendrils, leaves, and rough nuts brown
(Men sell not such in any town);
One heaved the golden weight
Of dish and fruit to offer her:
“Come buy, come buy,” was still their cry.
Laura stared but did not stir,
Longed but had no money:
The whisk-tailed merchant bade her taste
In tones as smooth as honey,
The cat-faced purred,
The rat-faced spoke a word
Of welcome, and the snail-paced even was heard;
One parrot-voiced and jolly
Cried “Pretty Goblin” still for “Pretty Polly;”—
One whistled like a bird.

But sweet-tooth Laura spoke in haste:
“Good folk, I have no coin;
To take were to purloin:
I have no copper in my purse,
I have no silver either,
And all my gold is on the furze
That shakes in windy weather
Above the rusty heather.”
“You have much gold upon your head,”
They answered all together:

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“Buy from us with a golden curl.”
 She clipped a precious golden lock,
 She dropped a tear more rare than pearl,
 Then sucked their fruit globes fair or red:
 Sweeter than honey from the rock,
 Stronger than man-rejoicing wine,
 Clearer than water flowed that juice;
 She never tasted such before,
 How should it cloy with length of use?
 She sucked and sucked and sucked the more
 Fruits which that unknown orchard bore;
 She sucked until her lips were sore;
 Then flung the emptied rinds away
 But gathered up one kernel stone,
 And knew not was it night or day
 As she turned home alone.

Lizzie met her at the gate
 Full of wise upbraidings:
 “Dear, you should not stay so late,
 Twilight is not good for maidens;
 Should not loiter in the glen
 In the haunts of goblin men.
 Do you not remember Jeanie,
 How she met them in the moonlight,
 Took their gifts both choice and many,
 Ate their fruits and wore their flowers
 Plucked from bowers
 Where summer ripens at all hours?
 But ever in the noonlight
 She pined and pined away;
 Sought them by night and day,
 Found them no more, but dwindled and grew grey;
 Then fell with the first snow,
 While to this day no grass will grow
 Where she lies low:
 I planted daisies there a year ago
 That never blow.
 You should not loiter so.”
 “Nay, hush,” said Laura:
 “Nay, hush, my sister:
 I ate and ate my fill,
 Yet my mouth waters still;
 To-morrow night I will

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Buy more;" and kissed her:
"Have done with sorrow;
I'll bring you plums to-morrow
Fresh on their mother twigs,
Cherries worth getting;
You cannot think what figs
My teeth have met in,
What melons icy-cold
Piled on a dish of gold
Too huge for me to hold,
What peaches with a velvet nap,
Pellucid grapes without one seed:
Odorous indeed must be the mead
Whereon they grow, and pure the wave they drink
With lilies at the brink,
And sugar-sweet their sap."

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Golden head by golden head,
Like two pigeons in one nest
Folded in each other's wings,
They lay down in their curtained bed:
Like two blossoms on one stem,
Like two flakes of new-fallen snow,
Like two wands of ivory
Tipped with gold for awful kings.
Moon and stars gazed in at them,
Wind sang to them lullaby,
Lumbering owls forbore to fly,
Not a bat flapped to and fro
Round their rest:
Cheek to cheek and breast to breast
Locked together in one nest.

Early in the morning
When the first cock crowed his warning,
Neat like bees, as sweet and busy,
Laura rose with Lizzie:
Fetched in honey, milked the cows,
Air'd and set to rights the house,
Kneaded cakes of whitest wheat,
Cakes for dainty mouths to eat,
Next churned butter, whipped up cream,
Fed their poultry, sat and sewed;
Talked as modest maidens should:

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Lizzie with an open heart,
 Laura in an absent dream,
 One content, one sick in part;
 One warbling for the mere bright day's delight,
 One longing for the night.

At length slow evening came:
 They went with pitchers to the reedy brook;
 Lizzie most placid in her look,
 Laura most like a leaping flame.
 They drew the gurgling water from its deep;
 Lizzie plucked purple and rich golden flags,
 Then turning homeward said: "The sunset flushes
 Those furthest loftiest crags;
 Come, Laura, not another maiden lags.
 No wilful squirrel wags,
 The beasts and birds are fast asleep."
 But Laura loitered still among the rushes
 And said the bank was steep.

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And said the hour was early still
 The dew not fallen, the wind not chill;
 Listening ever, but not catching
 The customary cry,
 "Come buy, come buy,"
 With its iterated jingle
 Of sugar-baited words:
 Not for all her watching
 Once discerning even one goblin
 Racing, whisking, tumbling, hobbling;
 Let alone the herds
 That used to tramp along the glen,
 In groups or single,
 Of brisk fruit-merchant men.

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Till Lizzie urged, "O Laura, come;
 I hear the fruit-call but I dare not look:
 You should not loiter longer at this brook:
 Come with me home.
 The stars rise, the moon bends her arc,
 Each glowworm winks her spark,
 Let us get home before the night grows dark:
 For clouds may gather
 Though this is summer weather,

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Put out the lights and drench us through;
Then if we lost our way what should we do?"

Laura turned cold as stone
To find her sister heard that cry alone,
That goblin cry,
"Come buy our fruits, come buy."
Must she then buy no more such dainty fruit?
Must she no more such succous pasture find,
Gone deaf and blind?

Her tree of life drooped from the root: 260
She said not one word in her heart's sore ache;
But peering thro' the dimness, nought discerning,
Trudg'd home, her pitcher dripping all the way;
So crept to bed, and lay
Silent till Lizzie slept;
Then sat up in a passionate yearning,
And gnashed her teeth for baulked desire, and wept
As if her heart would break.

Day after day, night after night,
Laura kept watch in vain
In sullen silence of exceeding pain.
She never caught again the goblin cry:
"Come buy, come buy;"—
She never spied the goblin men
Hawking their fruits along the glen:
But when the noon wax'd bright
Her hair grew thin and grey;
She dwindled, as the fair full moon doth turn
To swift decay and burn 280
Her fire away.

One day remembering her kernel-stone
She set it by a wall that faced the south;
Dewed it with tears, hoped for a root,
Watched for a waxing shoot,
But there came none;
It never saw the sun,
It never felt the trickling moisture run:
While with sunk eyes and faded mouth
She dreamed of melons, as a traveller sees
False waves in desert drouth
With shade of leaf-crowned trees,
And burns the thirstier in the sandful breeze.

She no more swept the house,
 Tended the fowls or cows,
 Fetched honey, kneaded cakes of wheat,
 Brought water from the brook:
 But sat down listless in the chimney-nook
 And would not eat.

Tender Lizzie could not bear
 To watch her sister's cankerous care
 Yet not to share.

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She night and morning
 Caught the goblins' cry:
 "Come buy our orchard fruits,
 Come buy, come buy;"—
 Beside the brook, along the glen,
 She heard the tramp of goblin men,
 The yoke and stir
 Poor Laura could not hear;
 Longed to buy fruit to comfort her,
 But feared to pay too dear.
 She thought of Jeanie in her grave,
 Who should have been a bride;
 But who for joys brides hope to have
 Fell sick and died
 In her gay prime,
 In earliest winter time
 With the first glazing rime,
 With the first snow-fall of crisp winter time.

Till Laura dwindling
 Seemed knocking at Death's door:
 Then Lizzie weighed no more
 Better and worse;
 But put a silver penny in her purse,
 Kissed Laura, crossed the heath with clumps of furze
 At twilight, halted by the brook:
 And for the first time in her life
 Began to listen and look.

Laughed every goblin
 When they spied her peeping:
 Came towards her hobbling,
 Flying, running, leaping,
 Puffing and blowing,
 Chuckling, clapping, crowing,

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Clucking and gobbling,
Mopping and mowing,
Full of airs and graces,
Pulling wry faces,
Demure grimaces,
Cat-like and rat-like,
Ratel- and wombat-like,
Snail-paced in a hurry,
Parrot-voiced and whistler,
Helter skelter, hurry skurry,
Chattering like magpies,
Fluttering like pigeons,
Gliding like fishes,—
Hugged her and kissed her:
Squeezed and caressed her:
Stretched up their dishes,
Panniers, and plates:
“Look at our apples
Russet and dun,
Bob at our cherries,
Bite at our peaches,
Citrons and dates,
Grapes for the asking,
Pears red with basking
Out in the sun,
Plums on their twigs;
Pluck them and suck them,
Pomegranates, figs.”—
“Good folk,” said Lizzie,
Mindful of Jeanie:
“Give me much and many: —
Held out her apron,
Tossed them her penny.
“Nay, take a seat with us,
Honour and eat with us,”
They answered grinning:
“Our feast is but beginning.
Night yet is early,
Warm and dew-pearly,
Wakeful and starry:
Such fruits as these
No man can carry:
Half their bloom would fly,

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Half their dew would dry,
 Half their flavour would pass by.
 Sit down and feast with us,
 Be welcome guest with us,
 Cheer you and rest with us.”—
 “Thank you,” said Lizzie: “But one waits
 At home alone for me:
 So without further parleying,
 If you will not sell me any
 Of your fruits though much and many,
 Give me back my silver penny
 I tossed you for a fee.”—
 They began to scratch their pates,
 No longer wagging, purring,
 But visibly demurring,
 Grunting and snarling.
 One called her proud,
 Cross-grained, uncivil;
 Their tones waxed loud,
 Their looks were evil.
 Lashing their tails
 They trod and hustled her,
 Elbowed and jostled her,
 Clawed with their nails,
 Barking, mewling, hissing, mocking,
 Tore her gown and soiled her stocking,
 Twitched her hair out by the roots,
 Stamped upon her tender feet,
 Held her hands and squeezed their fruits
 Against her mouth to make her eat.

 White and golden Lizzie stood,
 Like a lily in a flood,—
 Like a rock of blue-veined stone
 Lashed by tides obstreperously,—
 Like a beacon left alone
 In a hoary roaring sea,
 Sending up a golden fire,—
 Like a fruit-crowned orange-tree
 White with blossoms honey-sweet
 Sore beset by wasp and bee,—
 Like a royal virgin town

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Topped with gilded dome and spire
Close beleaguered by a fleet
Mad to tug her standard down. 420

One may lead a horse to water,
Twenty cannot make him drink.
Though the goblins cuffed and caught her,
Coaxed and fought her,
Bullied and besought her,
Scratched her, pinched her black as ink,
Kicked and knocked her,
Mauled and mocked her,
Lizzie uttered not a word;
Would not open lip from lip
Lest they should cram a mouthful in:
But laughed in heart to feel the drip
Of juice that syropped all her face,
And lodged in dimples of her chin,
And streaked her neck which quaked like curd.

At last the evil people,
Worn out by her resistance,
Flung back her penny, kicked their fruit
Along whichever road they took, 440
Not leaving root or stone or shoot;
Some writhed into the ground,
Some dived into the brook
With ring and ripple,
Some scudded on the gale without a sound,
Some vanished in the distance.

In a smart, ache, tingle,
Lizzie went her way;
Knew not was it night or day;
Sprang up the bank, tore thro' the furze,
Threaded copse and dingle,
And heard her penny jingle
Bouncing in her purse,—
Its bounce was music to her ear.
She ran and ran
As if she feared some goblin man
Dogged her with gibe or curse
Or something worse:
But not one goblin scurried after,
Nor was she pricked by fear; 460

The kind heart made her windy-paced
That urged her home quite out of breath with haste
And inward laughter.

She cried, "Laura," up the garden,
"Did you miss me?
Come and kiss me.
Never mind my bruises,
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;
For your sake I have braved the glen
And had to do with goblin merchant men."

Laura started from her chair,
Flung her arms up in the air,
Clutched her hair:
"Lizzie, Lizzie, have you tasted
For my sake the fruit forbidden?
Must your light like mine be hidden,
Your young life like mine be wasted,
Undone in mine undoing,
And ruined in my ruin,
Thirsty, cankered, goblin-ridden?"—
She clung about her sister,
Kissed and kissed and kissed her:
Tears once again
Refreshed her shrunken eyes,
Dropping like rain
After long sultry drouth;
Shaking with anguish fear, and pain,
She kissed and kissed her with a hungry mouth.

Her lips began to scorch,
That juice was wormwood to her tongue,
She loathed the feast:
Writhing as one possessed she leaped and sung,
Rent all her robe, and wrung
Her hands in lamentable haste,
And beat her breast.

Her locks streamed like the torch
Borne by a racer at full speed,
Or like the mane of horses in their flight,

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Or like an eagle when she stems the light
Straight toward the sun,
Or like a caged thing freed,
Or like a flying flag when armies run.

Swift fire spread through her veins, knocked at her heart,
Met the fire smouldering there
And overbore its lesser flame;
She gorged on bitterness without a name:
Ah! fool, to choose such part
Of soul-consuming care!
Sense failed in the mortal strife:
Like the watch-tower of a town
Which an earthquake shatters down,
Like a lightning-stricken mast,
Like a wind-uprooted tree
Spun about,
Like a foam-topped waterspout
Cast down headlong in the sea,
She fell at last;
Pleasure past and anguish past,
Is it death or is it life?

Life out of death.
That night long Lizzie watched by her,
Counted her pulse's flagging stir,
Felt for her breath,
Held water to her lips, and cooled her face
With tears and fanning leaves:
But when the first birds chirped about their eaves,
And early reapers plodded to the place
Of golden sheaves,
And dew-wet grass
Bowed in the morning winds so brisk to pass,
And new buds with new day
Opened of cup-like lilies on the stream,
Laura awoke as from a dream,
Laughed in the innocent old way,
Hugged Lizzie but not twice or thrice;
Her gleaming locks showed not one thread of grey,
Her breath was sweet as May
And light danced in her eyes.

Days, weeks, months, years
Afterwards, when both were wives

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With children of their own;
 Their mother-hearts beset with fears,
 Their lives bound up in tender lives;
 Laura would call the little ones
 And tell them of her early prime,
 Those pleasant days long gone
 Of not-returning time:
 Would talk about the haunted glen,
 The wicked, quaint fruit-merchant men,
 Their fruits like honey to the throat
 But poison in the blood;
 (Men sell not such in any town):
 Would tell them how her sister stood
 In deadly peril to do her good,
 And win the fiery antidote:
 Then joining hands to little hands
 Would bid them cling together,
 "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."

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3.3.2 Discussion

On the surface level 'Goblin Market' is what may be called a "story poem". Loosely speaking it may be placed in the ballad tradition. It is a narrative that follows a swift, racy pace, revolves around a (then) socially acceptable moral lesson. The distinctive feature lies in the fact this poem is about a female character, her fall from grace, and subsequent redemption. If we look at the theme we find similarities with the ambitious project tackled by Milton in his *Paradise Lost*. There are, however, significant differences. Christina Rossetti's poem speaks of no male characters, except for the goblins that are not human but half-animals, whereas Milton's epic speaks of the fall of Adam. 'Goblin Market' speaks of transgression by a female protagonist; the role of a Christ-like savior is taken up by another female character, the erring girl's sister. The central motif remains the same: succumbing to temptation, suffering as punishment, sacrifice and redemption.

In the very first lines (1-80), the poem lays bare the situation: there are two sisters, Laura and Lizzie, young, innocent, and virginal. And there is temptation that lurks everywhere in the form of strange, deformed goblins that appear as fruit-sellers to seduce and destroy the innocence of unsuspecting girls. The goblins are fearsome yet fascinating. One of the sisters, Laura, finds herself being drawn towards them despite her sibling's admonishments.

Lines 81-140 speak of Laura's transgression: she partakes of the Goblins fruit, paying for them with a symbolic lock of her golden hair, and returns home satisfied. A wise Lizzie upbraids her and reminds her of the harm the Goblins did to a certain Jeanie who had tasted their fruit and died in her youth. Laura, however, is sort of intoxicated with the Goblin's feast and pays little attention (141-183). As they fall asleep, they present a pretty picture (184-198), typically Pre-Raphaelite in its detailed description.

The following day, a change comes over the errant girl. She goes about her chores as usual but pines for the night when goblins would appear with their wares. However when the twilight gathers, her sister, Lizzie can hear the goblins call but Laura cannot. This makes Laura realize that her desire for more fruit from the goblins would never be satisfied, and that she is now doomed to a life of frustrated desire (199-268).

Lines 269-328 describe Laura's suffering and decline. It appears she will now suffer a fate as miserable as Jeanie's. Finally, when she is at death's door, Lizzie decides to save her somehow, so she goes to the goblin men, and asks for some fruit. The goblins insist that she should eat the fruit in their presence but she refuses to do so. Thereupon they are enraged and attack her with the fruit, trying to force her to eat. She stands stoically, braving their assault, and is covered with juices (329-446). In this dishevelled state, drenched with fruit-juices, Lizzie runs home and tells Laura to lick the juices off her. The ailing sister does so, and is saved but only after suffering a raging fever (447-542).

The concluding lines of the poem (543-567) shift the focus into the future and speak of the two sisters as grown women, contented with their homes and children, warning their daughters of the dangers that may befall them if they go astray, advising them to stand by each other in times of need.

This is the narrative at the obvious level. Writing in times when women were supposed to be angels in their house, it appears as though Christina Rossetti is reinforcing the Victorian ideal of womanhood. Laura is innocent and happy as long as she remains within the confines of domesticity, away from temptations of the outside world, particularly temptations related to female desires. Accepting the repressive norms of society, she could ensure for herself a trouble-free existence. However, when she breaks the social taboo, she has to suffer. Lizzie who admonishes her from time to time, acts as a moral voice of the times, repeating the socially correct message.

Some critics, referring to the poet's personal life and her rejection of men and marriage, read the poem as an expression of Christina Rossetti's underlying fear of sexuality. The goblins, in their evil, distorted guise, represent the latent fear of men that Christina Rossetti probably lived with. This may be related to the fact that there are no normal men in the narrative. Even when in the final stanza 'Goblin Market' tells of Laura and Lizzie in their mature years, neither their husbands nor their sons are mentioned. They are shown only in the company of their daughters and the close bonding between them is stressed. The concluding lines further strengthen the theme that sisterhood is powerful and this makes 'Goblin Market' an unmistakably feminist poem. No wonder, therefore, feminist critics discovered much to be lauded in the poem.

The two sisters of the poem, it has been argued, may be taken to represent two sides of the poet: one stern, self-denying and ascetic, the other sensuous, hedonistic, and self-indulgent. Lizzie represents the society with its repressive norms while Laura is the rebel, questioning and transgressing those norms. In keeping with the Victorian ideology, Laura suffers because she breaks the rules. She pays a heavy price for not observing the moral code. And when she regains life and vitality through her sister by symbolically “eating” her, she is in a way ingesting the moral code, reconciling to and accepting the social norms she had earlier transgressed. Consequently, she can be happy once more.

Like the women portrayed by the other Pre-Raphaelite poets, ‘Goblin Market’ also gives us a picture of a woman who is weak and vulnerable. Laura, as she wilts away, is very close to the kind of women immortalized on the canvas by Dante Rossetti and his followers. Christina Rossetti was far too conditioned by the social milieu not to be influenced by the stereotype. And yet, being an intelligent, thinking person, she could not rest with merely the conventional portrait of women. So her protagonist is given other traits: a questioning mind (like her creator’s), a spirit of adventure, and the courage to face the consequences of rebellion. Similarly, Lizzie, even though she represents the patriarchal order, is presented as an individual that one may not break: for instance when she stands firm as a rock, facing the onslaughts of the goblins. Contrasted with the evil role played by the male goblins, she takes on a positive, nurturing role as she risks her own life to save her sister and nurse her back to health once more. For this reason ‘Goblin Market’ remains a strong, woman-centered poem.

The poem may be compared to Keats ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ where a loitering knight encounters a beautiful woman and succumbs to her charms. The woman betrays him and he is doomed to pine forever more. Whereas Keats portrays a *femme fatale* (a deadly woman) Christina Rossetti in ‘Goblin Market’ portrays *les hommes fatales* (dangerous men) in the horrendous band of goblins. She is concerned with how men manage to seduce women and then discard them once their object is fulfilled. According to the patriarchal Victorian ideology, women are attractive as long as they are virginal, but once “fallen” they are of no use and lose their charm. These are rules laid down by men (goblins in the poem) who are the lawmakers.

The parallel between the consumption of the fruit and the loss of chastity, thus, is obvious through the poem. And yet the theme is subtly dealt with, in keeping with the Victorian taboo of female sexuality. Christina Rossetti, even though she tackles a bold theme, does not openly flout convention. She veils her point so successfully through the allegory that “Goblin Market” is often mistaken for children’s literature.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Discuss the surface and the deeper meaning of the poem.

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- ii) Do you think the goblins represent the male world? If so, is the poem an attack on patriarchy? Illustrate your answer with the help of the appearance, habitat, and profession of the goblins.

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- iii) Highlight the connection between poetry and painting in ‘Goblin Market.’

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- iv) Make a list of the animals mentioned in the poem and note how they are all connected with the goblins. Try and assess the symbolic value of the animal imagery

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(Check your answers with these given at the end of the Unit).

3.4 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have talked about Christina Rossetti and her extremely interesting poem ‘Goblin Market’. It is a simple poem and very easy to understand. However, it has a deeper connotation which represents the values of the Victorian age.

3.5 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) On the surface level the poem is a story of two sisters, one of whom eats some fruit given to her by goblins and falls very ill. Eventually, her sister saves her life. On a deeper level, it is about the fall from

grace and subsequent redemption of women who transgress from their moral path, and how they suffer because of this.

- ii) Note that the goblins inhabit a glen — a shady, mysterious place and only emerge in the dark, after sundown. Also take into account that theirs is a forbidden world into which, maidens may stray only at the risk of their lives. Besides, they are merchants engaged in selling fruit that is not normal or seasonal, but enchanted and which has a disastrous effect on any girl who eats it. This fruit is given not at an honest price, but for a lock of hair (to Laura) or forcibly thrust (as attempted in Lizzie's case). The girls are either helplessly caught in the game the goblins play or else they, like Lizzie, must remain strong and ward them off.
- iii) Compare the images and colours Christina Rossetti uses for the goblins with those used for the two sisters. Note how, she uses words the way an artist would use paints.
- iv) The animals mentioned are: cat, rat, snail, wombat, ratel (badger). These animals are nocturnal and vermin like. They are perceived as despicable and problem causing.

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