

Summary of *Goblin Market* lecture, November 10, 2014

KEYWORDS: PRE-RAPHAELITE; MORAL; ALLEGORY; ANGEL IN THE HOUSE; CARPE DIEM; SLANT RHYME/ HALF-RHYME; MASCULINE RHYME; FEMININE RHYME

Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) was the sister of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who was a famous pre-Raphaelite painter – that term is used to describe Rossetti and his circle, as well as later 19th-century artists influenced by them – they looked back to earlier art forms and to an imagined pre-industrial past

Christina Rossetti was devoutly religious, and *Goblin Market*, first published in 1862, can be read as conventionally Victorian in its moral lesson: the good sister is the one who resists temptation, does not stray from the path, and accepts her womanly duties gladly

Laura is said to be “Like a vessel at the launch/ When its last restraint is gone,” suggesting the dangers when women are not appropriately confined or restricted

Evening by evening
Among the brookside rushes,
Laura bow’d her head to hear,
Lizzie veil’d 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,
Pricking up her golden head:
“We must not look at goblin men”

Laura and Lizzie both react modestly (blushing) to the goblins’ cries, but note that by the end of this section, Laura is “pricking up” her head even as she repeats the warning not to stray

When she does stray, a simile likens her to, among other things, a boat being cast out into the current:

Laura stretch’d her gleaming neck
Like a rush-imbedded swan,
Like a lily from the beck,
Like a moonlit poplar branch,
Like a vessel at the launch
When its last restraint is gone.

The repetition of “Like”, followed by the “when” creates a sense of irresistible forward motion

There is a slant rhyme right before that line; a “slant rhyme” or half-rhyme is consonance on the final letters of the words; we discussed if this might be a significant feature

Later, we discussed whether the poem similarly deploys masculine rhyme (rhyme on a single stressed syllable) and feminine rhyme (two or more matched syllables, with the final syllable unstressed) to thematic effect

Certainly the rhyme- and rhythm patterns of the poem are varied and unpredictable

Jeanie and her fate show the end result of a lack of restraint:

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**...

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**.

Notice how these two sections dealing with Jeanie’s fate pile up rhymes on the same sounds (-ay, -ow in the first case, -ime in the second): the relentless repetition underlines the inevitability of the tragic consequences of a moral fall

Here, Jeanie, “who should have been a bride,” succumbs before the proper moment (“for joys brides hope to have”) and accepts the forbidden fruit

Premature aging and death is the result – the fact that no flowers grow on her grave suggest that her death is both mortal and spiritual – she has lost

everything, both the hopes of a fruitful life on this earth, and salvation in the next life, through her attraction to the goblin men and to the fruits they offer

The fruits represent sensual delight in many forms, though certainly the fact that the poem deals exclusively with female temptation makes sexuality a key concern: Jeanie (and nearly Laura) echo the fall of Eve

Women are thus figured as weak, subject to straying; Lizzie, content with her chores and dreams of the future, is the alternative to the Eve/ whore model, the so-called “angel in the house,” the model Victorian woman who maintains a peaceful domestic space to which a husband can return after the daily toils of business or empire

But Lizzie also offers a model of female heroism in her triumph over the goblin men, and note that her triumph is achieved through her ability to resist temptation; this is one element of the poem that seems to pull against a simple understanding of its moral scheme

The poem’s richly sensual symbols also seem to pull in another direction, tugging against the apparently didactic goals of the moral allegory

The poem actually opens with the goblin men’s cries, and their appeals are made to us before we know we are not to listen to them

Apples and quinces,
Lemons and oranges,
Plump unpeck’d cherries,
Melons and raspberries,
Bloom-down-cheek’d 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

This passage appeal to all the senses; the list-like quality produced by the lines ending on -berries piles up the sensory delights

The appeal to buy in the face of mornings and evenings that fly by recalls the tradition of *carpe diem* poetry (*carpe diem* means seize the day; poems in this tradition often encourage readers to enjoy the delights of the body while they still can)

And of course, Lizzie's victory involves wallowing in the fruits and juices she wins from the goblin men; Laura receives her salvation from Lizzie's flesh, or to put it another way, the flesh is the vehicle for Lizzie's sisterly love

We finished by discussing the (perhaps disappointing?) contrast between the calm domestic end of the poem, and the appeal of the sections dealing with the goblins and their fruits