

'Goblin Market', an early work considered to be one of Rosetti's masterpieces, was supposedly intended simply as a fairy story. Despite assertions that Rosetti meant nothing profound by the tale, its rich, complex, and suggestive language has caused the poem to be practically ignored as children's literature and instead regarded variously as an erotic exploration of sexual fantasy, a feminist glorification of 'sisterhood', or a Christian allegory about temptation and redemption, among other readings.

Marxism, however, is a 'materialist philosophy': that is it tries to explain things

'without assuming the existence of a world or of forces beyond the natural world around us...' and, more importantly 'the society we live in.' Marxist literary criticism maintains that writer's social class, and its prevailing 'ideology' (outlook, values, assumptions etc.) have a major bearing on what is written. Writers, Marxism proposes, are not simply autonomous 'inspired' individuals, whose creative genius enables them to bring forth great works of literature, but rather they are constantly and subconsciously formed by their social and economic contexts.¹ In *Goblin Market*, for instance, Rosetti takes a rather conservative stance on the issue of female sexual exploration which reflects her upper middle class Victorian upbringing.

Unlike more widespread approaches to literature, such as the 'practical critical theory' of Leavis² which focuses entirely on the language and form of texts, the values and assumptions analysed by a Marxist critic, are usually implicit, often unrecognised, but nevertheless 'suffuse the culture of a given time'³. In the words of American Marxist critic Fredric Jameson (in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, 1981) Literature often tries to 'repress' historical truth, but analysis can reveal its underlying ideology.⁴ Poems like 'Goblin Market' are sometimes unsettling in their self conscious experimentation and their occasional challenges to convention. Yet, these poems often choose to end in conventionally settled ways – with the thematic, dramatic or psychological tension resolved. For poets, such as Rosetti, this is perhaps a way of conserving existing social structure. Closure, in Rosetti's time, very often embodied a literal resignation of the more rebellious themes and characterization in a work, a giving over of the potential evoked in literature for destabilising convention. The final stanza of 'Goblin Market' talks of 'Days, weeks, months, years / Afterwards' (543-44), when the two sisters are married and have children. They have grown out of their childlike fantasies and have exchanged it for the reality of the traditional family. Lizzie is able to accept the sexual component necessary for starting a family, while Laura is able to return to the domestic sphere with new found responsibility. Such a development enables varied and opposed reader responses, including a sense of relief that conventional order or 'reality' is restored; or disappointment that a promised new order remains unrealised. In either case the poem's close is marked by deliverance back into the old world that was briefly deconstructed or subverted. Rosetti's production can be viewed therefore, from a Marxist perspective, as a self conscious attempt to appropriate and extend specific literary and social traditions.

¹ Beginning Theory: Marxist criticism/Marxist literary criticism: general/p.158

² The Nineteenth Century: Comparing Critical Approaches/p.51

³ Beginning Theory: Marxist criticism/The present: the influence of Althusser/p.163

⁴.Beginning Theory: Marxist criticism/ The present: the influence of Althusser/p.166

In addition Rosetti's treatment of her female characters is, in some ways, important for revealing the prevailing ideologies of the time, as well as perhaps other more radical ones which were shared by the poet herself. Her depictions of the two sisters, Laura and Lizzie, can be viewed largely as a perpetuation of Victorian *superstructure*, which is (as defined by Bertens, H.) 'the general process of social, political and intellectual life'⁵. Lizzie, who has maintained her innocence, possesses the rudimentary understanding that one's moral response to evil should be to avoid it and experiences a kind of ascension as a result. Her resistance against the goblin attack is described in terms of the colours white, blue and gold, with reference to a 'royal virgin town' (418), which link Lizzie by association to the Virgin Mary or, as D. M. R. Bentley and Diane D'Amico propose, Marian⁶. This association is important as Lizzie steps into the assumed role of the redeeming Christ figure. Now that she has succumbed to temptation, and has fallen Laura has no such moral compass and becomes ostracized as a result. She no longer tends to household duties: she neglects the livestock, stops baking and sits, brooding, by the fire. Laura's refusal to attend these chores further places her outside the domestic sphere⁷, because she is no longer able to perform the tasks that will someday give her value as a wife. That marriage is the main goal of the female characters in the context of the poem is implied by Lizzie's musings of Jeannie's fall and subsequent death:

'She thought of Jeanie in her grave,
who should have been a bride...' (312-3)

Jeannie represents the archaic belief in Victorian society that the 'fallen women' is bound to die early. This latter reading is evidenced in 'Goblin Market' through Lizzie's physical deterioration. She ages prematurely:

'Her hair grew thin and gray;
she dwindled, as the fair full moon doth turn
to swift decay...' (277-9)

and experiences a loss of reproductive ability. When Laura tries to cultivate a fruit tree from the kernel stone of one of the goblins' fruits, watering it with her tears, the pit does not take root and grow.

In Laura, however, Rosetti asserts her belief in redemption and restoration for the women who transgress. That the writing of 'Goblin Market' coincided with the period during which Rosetti worked at the Highgate Penitentiary attests to this belief. While Jeannie dies because of her sins, Laura is restored. Laura openly tells Lizzie of the bliss she experienced in eating her fill of the 'sugar-sweet' fruit (183), without compromising their relationship at all. Rather than rejection, Rosetti writes of the closeness, almost co-mingling of the sisters:

'Golden head by golden head,
Like two pigeons in one nest'. (184-5)

⁵ AQA Critical Anthology (01.09)/Bertens, H. (2001) *Literary Theory: The Basics*, (The Politics of Class: Marxism), (pp. 81-3), Abingdon: Routledge

⁶D'Amico, Diane/ Christina Rossetti: Faith, Gender, and Time/ Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP (1999)

Bentley, D. M. R./The Meretricious and the Meritorious in "Goblin Market: A Conjecture and an Analysis

⁷ Victorian social structure: men and women occupied different roles in society, or spheres. Women were assigned the domestic sphere which emphasized the importance of marriage, childbirth and respectability.

Rosetti's attitude towards unconventionality is significant, for she seems to encourage, by her writing, an ideology of acceptance rather than judgment. Laura is able to live a 'normal' life by the end of the poem and becomes a respectable wife and mother, whereas in Rosetti's society, women once 'fallen' could not regain respectability. It appears then, that Rosetti is not necessarily condemning sexual exploration as sinful, but rather she questions whether to do so would be profitable.

For a Marxist critic, the exploitation of one social class by another is explored extensively with regards to modern-industrial capitalism. For some, the result of this exploitation is alienation; a state which comes about when a worker is made to perform repetitive tasks of which he or she has no overall grasp. These alienated workers have undergone the process of 'reification', which is a term used in Marx's major work, 'Das Kapital'. It concerns the way, when capitalist goals and questions of profit are 'paramount', workers are 'bereft of their full humanity' and thought of as 'hands'. People, in a word become things. To sum up:

'The capitalist mode of production generates a view of the world – focused on profit – in which ultimately all of us function as objects and become alienated from ourselves.' (Bertens H.)

It is notable, therefore, that when Rosetti describes her chief antagonists, the goblins, they are portrayed as animal like. They are likened to cats, rats, snails, wombats etc; attributes that firmly separate them from human men. This condition results from the damaging effects of living under a capitalist regime, effects that have gradually caused the goblins lose touch with their own humanity.

Rosetti also explores the concept of 'reification' by reference to her female character, Laura. Her lack of coin with which to purchase the goblin's fruit places her in the precarious position of dependence on the goblins. Her acknowledgement that the only gold she possesses is to be found on the 'furze' (120) begins a short negotiation that takes place, in which party offers an alternative form of payment for the fruit. Laura's suggestion of the yellow flowers on a bush is rejected in favour of a more personal payment – a lock of her own hair. This is significant on a number of levels. Firstly, Laura's hair is golden, so it is associated with monetary value. Also, it is literally a part of Laura – something that she must cut from herself in order to give to the goblins. Finally, hair is biblically symbolic of a women's pride; to cut her hair is to defile herself in the eyes of a religious community. Specifically, gold hair in Victorian society often represented innocence threatened by defilement and was connected to commerce by the associative colour, according to Elisabeth Gitter.⁸ Therefore, Laura is literally selling herself in order to experience the fruit and, in the eyes of Marx, becomes alienated from her humanity as a result.

The implications of 'Goblin Market' are wide ranging and ambiguous, just as are the views of its author. Rosetti pulls down the ideological boundaries of femininity and sexuality through her characterization and language, only to reestablish them at the poem's close. Yet, to a Marxist critic, this is evidence of the turbulent times Rosetti found herself writing in and analysis reveals the underlying ideologies which were present under the surface of the seemingly conventional Victorian world.

⁸ Gitter, Elisabeth G. "The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination." (1984):

