

## On Rossetti's Goblin Market with the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism

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### Abstract

**Christina Rossetti was a well-known women poet in Victorian age of nineteen-century of England. She was the member of Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and ever regarded as one of the most talented women poets in English literary history. The poem Goblin Market, which consists of many meanings and thoughts, is highly regarded as one of Rossetti's most successful works. Via the research method of ethical literary criticism, the paper, with the background of Rossetti's age, tries to explain the ethical phenomena in the poem so as to reveal Rossetti's thoughts of religious salvation and feminine awareness of the poem.**

### Keywords

**Goblin Market; Ethical Literary Criticism; religious salvation; feminine awareness.**

### 1. Introduction

Christina Georgian Rossetti (1830-1894) was an outstanding women poet in Victorian Age of nineteen-century of England, and also an important member of Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The publication of Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market and Other Poems* in 1862 marked the first literary success of the Pre-Raphaelites. This meant a new form of poetry for readers' favor. Rossetti often found herself caught between the claims of worldly passion and celestial faith - this schism was central to her life and her poetry and may have its origin in the tension between her Italian and English ancestry. Meanwhile, her poetry was great influenced by her brother Dante Rossetti, who was the main founder and advocator of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and both of their poems are featured by lyricism and mystery with the color of melancholy and symbolism. Compared with her brother's poems, however, her poems are appeared with more pure and fresh and much full of piety and passion of religion. She was ever considered as one of the most talented women poets in English literary history and the successive Poet Laureate after Alfred Tennyson. Adeline Virginia Woolf, a celebrated English woman writer in 20<sup>th</sup> century, ever thought highly of her, "Christina Rossetti ranks first in English woman poets and she sings just like robin and nightingale sometimes." [1] Ford Madox, an English novelist and critic, considered her as "the greatest language master produced in nineteen-century - at least an English master." [2] Rossetti's works also exerted dramatic influence on Chinese literary world, and Chinese famed writer and scholar Wu Mi once highly praise Rossetti's poetry, "Compared with Mrs Browning, Christina Rossetti holds better in terms of moral quality and the value of poetry." [3]

The poem *Goblin Market* contains many ethical phenomena and thoughts which Rossetti from her heart tries to express. The ethical literary criticism, as a research method, is to read, analyze and interpret ethical phenomena in literary works so as to study literary authors and literary problems from perspective of ethics. The principle concepts of the method hold that literature in nature is a form of art of ethics since literature is the special expressions of ethical ideas and moral life in a particular historical period. The method also believes that Literature is not art of languages but a kind of art of text consisting of characters, not an aesthetic ideology but a material form existing via literal text. The main function of literature is to teaching and instruction and literary aesthetics is only serves for the former purpose. Chinese scholar Nie Zhenzhao in his critical essay, "On Ethical Literary

Criticism and Moral Criticism” has ever indicated that, “In terms of methodology, the ethical literary criticism is an approach to literary criticism, which bases on the introduction of ethical methods and the assimilation of them into the texture of literary critical methods. It is used not only to interpret the moral phenomena recorded in literature on a historical and dialectic basis, but also to make value judgment of present literary works mirroring the moral values in the reality.”<sup>[4]</sup> According to Professor Nie, the ethical literary criticism can't be regarded as a new academic discipline, but only a methodology. In another word, it is a methodology that it is from the viewpoint of ethic to interpret literary works, and tries to explore the relationship between authors and works, literature and readers, and the relationship between literature and society. Meanwhile, it will also provide literary researchers with an approach to give the ethical and moral explanations to the literary works, so as to attain a new understanding and explanation of a literary work. As a result, the terms such as ethics, incest, ethical taboo, ethical chaos, ethical consciousness, ethical situation, ethical identity, ethical choice are the key words for ethical literary criticism. With the research method, this paper tries to read and explain the ethical phenomena and conflicts in Rossetti's *Goblin Market* from the perspectives of religious salvation and feminism, so as to provide readers with new findings and value judgments in her poems.

## 2. Religious salvation in the poem

The poem, *Goblin Market*, narrates the story of two innocent sisters Laura and Lizzie who live together and depend onto each other closely. Every evening, they will go to the nearby river for water. Along the way, there are always some Goblin men who sell all kind of fruits which are rich in quantity and tastes. Initially, the two sisters are aware of the dangers and temptations from the cries of Goblin men. One evening, however, Laura was so curious about the fruits and their tastes and failed to the temptations from Goblin men. Since she had no money for the fruits, she exchanged the fruits from the Goblin merchants with her rare golden hair. Laura ate and sucked the delicious fruits to her heart's content. Lizzie, who waited for her sister at home, blamed Laura for home late and warned her with Jeanie's story. Instead, Laura didn't listen to her sister and even tried to induce Lizzie to eat fruits. After eating those fruits, however, Laura can't hear that wonderful cries from Goblin men any more while Lizzie can. Since Laura can't buy and eat any fruits, she gradually became weaker and weaker day by day and seemed to die. Lizzie realized her sister was dwindling away and decided to save her. She tried to find the goblin men and attempted to buy some fruits with penny. The goblin men were so pleasure to see Lizzie and tried many tricks to convince her, or even tortured her with violence in order to force her to eat the fruits by herself, instead of selling the fruits to Lizzie. With her complete determination, resistance and bravery, Lizzie fought against the Goblin men and finally arrived at home with fruits juice and pulp all over her body. After eating those juices and pulp of fruits on Lizzie's body, Laura experienced great agony and at last came back to her normal life and finally like Lizzie, led a happy life as a mother with her loved children. From the story told above, we can see clearly that there is a connection between the theme of poem and the story of Jesus Christ in the Bible. Since Christina Rossetti is a devout Christian, her works are inevitably influenced by Christian culture. According to the Bible, Adam and Eve happily live in the Garden of Eden initially. God once commanded them:

Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat:

But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. (Genesis 2:17-18)

Unfortunately, they were seduced by the serpent and disobeyed God's words by eating the fruits of knowledge tree. Since then, both of them were punished and driven out of the Garden of Eden. They both lived a miserable life with lots of sufferings. In the New Testament, the incarnated Lord Jesus Christ came to save man, and his death on the cross is thought as the source of human's salvation. In the *Goblin Market*, the process of Lizzie's saving of Laura can be compared to Jesus Christ's salvation for humankind. In the poem, Rossetti described the completely innocence of Laura who later

degenerated, “Laura stretched 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 restrain is gone.”<sup>[5]</sup>In the meantime, Rossetti also told that both of the sisters were fully aware of the dangers from the Goblin men and tried hard to resist the temptations from them, “‘lie close’, Laura said,/ 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?’” However, Laura sometimes could not help herself to her curiosity and the temptation from goblin men, then Lizzie warned her sister, but Laura disobeyed the words and even tried to persuade her sister to do the same, “‘Oh,’ cried Lizzie, “Laura, Laura,/ You should not peep at goblin’/ 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.” In this part of the poem, there comes the first ethical conflict between two sisters. Just like Eve in Bible can’t resist the lure from serpent, Laura can’t help to her curiosity and peeks the goblin men. On the contrary, her sister Lizzie shows a definite determination and will to resist the temptation. Later on, Laura was deceived by the goblin merchants and exchanged the fruits with her golden curl, “‘You have much gold upon your head,’/ They answered all together:/ ‘Buy from us with a golden curl.’/ She clipped a precious golden lock,/ She dropped a tear more rare than pearl.” Laura finally degenerated and paid for her maiden. After eating the fruits, Laura can’t hear the cries of goblin any more and became weaker and weaker, “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 waxed bright/ Her hair grew thin and grey;/ She dwindled, as the fair full moon doth turn/ To swift decay and burn/ Her fire away.” The story of Laura is just like Eve in Bible. In the Holy Book, in order to entice Eve to eat the forbidden fruits, the serpent said to Eve:

Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. (Genesis 3:4-5)

Since Eve can’t resist the lure of the serpent, she eventually gave herself up to the serpent’s words and ate the forbidden fruits and was driven out of the Garden of Eden. Later on, when Lizzie found Laura dwindling away and going to die, she decided to find goblin merchant to save her sister, “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.” In order to save her sister, Lizzie underwent a lot of sufferings. When the goblin men saw Lizzie intended to buy their fruits, they were beside themselves and tried to entice her to buy and eat their fruits by herself, “Laughed every goblin/ When they spied her peeping: / Came towards her hobbling... .. / 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.” However, Lizzie only wanted to buy some fruits to save her sister and refused to eat fruits. At this moment, the goblin men revealed themselves as serpents, they began to torture Lizzie and tried hard to force Lizzie to eat fruits, but they failed, “‘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,/ Half their dew would dry,/ Half their flavour would pass by.... .. / 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....../ At last the evil people/ Worn out by her resistance/ Some scudded on the gale without a sound,/ Some vanished in the distance. ” Finally, Lizzie got home with the juice and pulp of fruits all over her body. She asked Laura to eat that juice and pulp and eventually saved her. Obviously, Lizzie’s deed to save her sister is just like what Jesus has done in Bible. It was said that Jesus Christ has been flogged, mocked by the Roman soldiers, clothed in a purple robe, made to wear the crown of thorns, beaten and spat on. The bitter experience of Lizzie well resembles what Jesus Christ has experienced very much: her gown was torn by the goblin men, exactly as the loathing of Christ was ripped by the Roman soldiers. Suffering was a phase that both Lizzie and Christ must go through on their roads for salvation.

In the poem *Goblin Market*, the goblin men are also described as animals, which is similar to the serpent in the Holy Bible. They are depicted like, “One had a cat’s face,/ One whisked a tail,/ One tramped at a rat’s pace,/ One crawled like a snail These goblin men are just like the serpent in Bible. They are short, ugly dwarf with dark-green skin, red eyes in appearance as well as evil, cunning, deceptive nature.

All in all, through the conflict ethical actions between two sisters Lizzie and Laura, Rossetti tried to revealed the similarities among the two sisters, goblin men, Eve, Serpent and Jesus Christ. Via the Lizzie’s brave actions to save her sister Laura, the poem repeats Jesus salvation for sinful people in the story of Bible, which revealed the religious meaning of salvation in the poem.

### 3. Feminist awareness in the poem

According to Hawkesworth ,Feminism is “a range of political movements, ideologies, and social movements that share a common goal: to define, establish, and achieve political, economic, personal, and social equality of sexes.”<sup>[6]</sup> This includes seeking to establish educational and professional opportunities for women that are equal to those for men. In the age of Victoria, feminist thought was affected by the thoughts of equality, liberty and philanthropy which were developed in French Revolution. And Rossetti was living in such a cultural environment. Even though Rossetti was not a feminist, she paid much attention to woman’s issues of her age such as marriage as a bondage to women, the hurting relationship between men and women and the double standard to treat the chastity between men and women etc. In Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*, she expresses her concerns about the woman issues.

In the poem *Goblin Market*, for the first instance, Rossetti believes that the sisters like Lizzie and Laura are innocent and love to each other, “/ 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-fall’n snow,/ Like two wands of ivory...../ Not a bat flapped to and fro/ Round their rest:/ Cheek to cheek and breast to breast / Locked together in one nest.” In these lines, on one hand, the words like pigeons, blossoms, flakes and ivory all represents innocence, harmony and sweet. In the meantime, the lines also depicts that the two sisters together live in a peaceful and quiet life. On the other hand, the part also implies that two sisters are weak and feminine and easy to be hurt by men. In the poem, all the goblins are depicted by Rossetti as goblin men and goblin merchant who intend to induce the two sisters and finally Laura degenerates. Meanwhile, the goblin men are evil in appearance and nature, they are like all kind of evil men, “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.” Also in the poem, through the Lizzie’s reminiscence, there was a girl Jeanie who had been seduced and cheated by the goblin men and finally died, “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? ...../ 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.” Even though when Jeanie die and Lizzie planted the flower on her tomb, the flower fails to bloom, which indicates the miserable destiny of Jeanie because of her degeneration.

During the course of Laura’s degeneration, there was a time in which Laura intended to resist goblin men’s temptation. However, Laura finally failed and exchanged the fruits from goblin merchants with her rare golden curls and “she dropped a tear more rare than pearl”. Why Laura was so sad about that? According to Pooper Wendy, “in western culture and especially in the Victorian age, a woman would regarded her hair as a preciousness as her maiden.”<sup>[7]</sup> If she cut one curl of her hair and gave it to a man, it would mean that she would sacrifice her maiden for him. So when Laura failed to resist the temptation of goblin merchant and exchanged the fruits for her golden curls, she felt lost her most important thing. On the other hand, Laura also felt pity on herself since she couldn’t resist the temptation from outside world which also indicates that Rossetti’s sympathy for the women’s weakness and inferior status of her age and her hatred for the goblin merchant’s “fruits” which represent the material temptations of the Victorian age. After Laura ate the fruits, she couldn’t hear the cry from the goblin men to get any fruits, and she began turning to the “kernel-stone”, the only hope she gained from them, “One day remembering her kernel-shone/ She set it by a wall that6 faced the south;/ Dewed it with tears, hoped for a root,/ Watched for a waxing shoot,” However, Laura’s last hope doomed to die, “But there came none;/ It never saw the sun,/ It never felt the trickling moisture run.C with her last hope losing, “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.” As a matter of fact, Rossetti used to help many degenerated prostitutes or abandoned girls wo lost their faith at that age. From 1860 to 1870, Rossetti worked in a girl- prostitute rescue station in Highgate of England to help those delivering girls. During the period, she saw many lost girls and their unfortunate encounter and miserable lives. As a result, Rossetti felt deep sympathy for those girls and knew better the relationship between men and women of her age. In many of Rossetti’s poems, she revealed the feelings and her sympathy for them. As Walter Raleigh put it, “after reading her poems, the only thing I want to do is to cry instead of criticism.”<sup>[8]</sup>

Consequently, the poem *Goblin Market* reveals that the men (the goblin men) took the advantage of their wealth (fruits) to seduce the innocent girls ( Laura and Jeanie) in the Victorian age. And once they succeed, they would disappeared and abandon the deceived girls. The event of Laura and Jeanie also indicates that at Rossetti’s age, the traditional values are challenged and people at that time tried to turn to the new value of materialism. However, according to Rossetti’s salvation thought, the lack of the traditional ethical values will be destined to a dead end.

On the other hand, when Laura fell into the dead edge, Lizzie can’t help herself to save her sister, “Tender Lizzie could not bear / To watch her sister’s cankerous care/Yet not to share./She night and morning/Caught the goblins’cry.../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.” Finally, undergoing many tortures and difficulties, Lizzie escaped from the goblin men’s temptations and prosecution and went back home with the fruit juice all over her body to save Laura. In the final part of the poem, Rossetti expressed her opinions of sisterhood, “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.” Obviously, Rossetti would like to stress the importance of sisterhood and sweet helpful relationship among the women while the men as goblin men of her age are evil and deceitful.

#### 4. Conclusion

From the analysis of ethical phenomena and conflicts in the poem above, Rossetti tries to reappear the story of Jesus Christ, who sacrifice his life to save the sin people, via the poem’s theme of Lizzie’s saving of her degenerated sister Laura. Obviously, Rossetti in the poem indicates that in the Victorian

age people are wandering between the traditional values and new ones and with the great amount of fortunes created out in the Victorian age, it was hard for people to resist the temptations of materials. However, according to Rossetti's opinions revealed in the poem, she believes that people should treasure the traditional values and take a cautious attitude toward the new ones emerging in her age. On the other hand, Rossetti also calls for the equality of men and women in many social aspects and expresses her sympathies and affections for the lost women of her age, as well as her accusing the men of her age of treating the women unfairly and unreasonably. As a result, the poem *Goblin Market* reveals Rossetti's feminine perception in many ways.

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