



Poetryclass Fresh Ideas for Learning from The Poetry Society

“Sweet to tongue and sound to eye”

Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market’

By Dr Bethan Roberts with additional material by The Poetry Society

The Poetry Society and Watts Gallery Trust resource for A Level students

Links to exam criteria

- Selecting appropriate references
- Confidence with using terminology
- Understanding of methods writers use to create meaning
- Analysis of the effects these methods have
- Literary Critical Theories

Topics at a glance

- Sisterhood
- Eroticism
- Feminism
- Marxism
- Fantasy
- Fruit
- Goblins
- Consumerism



Above: Portrait of Christina Rossetti, 1857, by John Brett. Oil on panel, private collection.

Introduction

This learning resource introduces A Level students to the poet Christina Rossetti and explores one of her most famous pieces of work, ‘Goblin Market’. The resource has been created in collaboration with the Watts Gallery Trust, Guildford, to compliment the exhibition *Christina Rossetti: Vision and Verse*. It is suitable for Key Stage 5 students and is designed for them to explore individually, in pairs and as a group, although tasks can be adapted to fit an individual’s learning requirements.



Christina Rossetti, her family and circle

Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830–94) was born on 5 December 1830 to Italian parents, the youngest of four children. Her siblings included poet and artist Dante Gabriel and critic and editor William Michael Rossetti, founders and members of the literary and artistic movement the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The Brotherhood were a group of exclusively male artists, poets, and critics – formed in part in a revolt against the ugliness of modern life and dress – whose work shared an emphasis on fidelity to nature, moral seriousness and religious themes, with a strong medieval influence.

Rossetti was educated at home, and, after ill health cut short her work as a governess, she led a quiet, solitary life of writing, religion and volunteer work. Rossetti reportedly gave up playing chess and going to the theatre as secular pleasures that might interfere with her deep religious devotion. She was briefly engaged to the painter James Collinson – also a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood – yet the engagement broke off due to religious reasons and Rossetti never married.

Literary career

Rossetti is said to have started composing poems at the age of eleven, and began to be published in periodicals when she was eighteen. *Goblin Market and Other Poems* appeared in 1862 when she was thirty-two. On reading ‘Goblin Market’, the Victorian critic John Ruskin declared that Rossetti’s “irregular measures” were the “calamity of modern poetry” and that she “should exercise herself in the severest commonplace of metre until she can write as the public like”. However, it was received by most critics and readers with great enthusiasm. *Goblin Market and Other Poems* was followed by *The Prince’s Progress and Other Poems* in 1866, *Sing-Song, a Nursery Rhyme Book* in 1872, and *A Pageant and Other Poems* in 1881. Rossetti also published poems elsewhere and wrote numerous prose works, including *Speaking Likenesses* (1874), a collection of fairy-tales, and *Time Flies: A Reading Diary* (1885).



Image, top right: Gabriel and Christina, 1922, by Max Beerbohm. From *Rossetti and his Circle* (London: William Heinemann). Collection of Stephen Calloway.

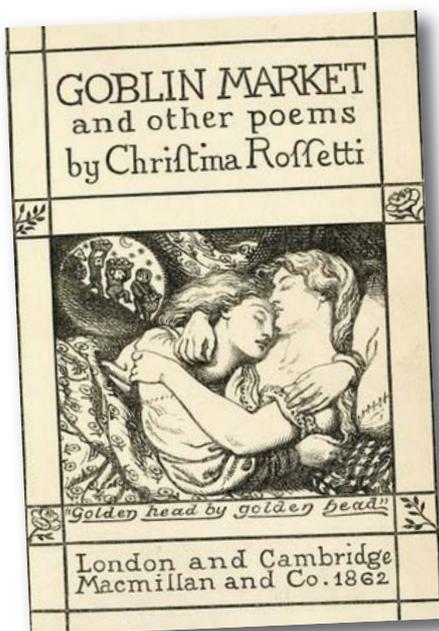
Poetic style

Rossetti’s verse spans fantasy and children’s verse, ballads, love lyrics, sonnets, and religious poetry. Her poems are celebrated for their technical virtuosity and experimental forms, their simple diction and beautiful, languid imagery. Much of her poetry reflects her strong religious beliefs and explores themes of loss, melancholy, death, secrets, veiled eroticism and unhappy or frustrated love. Although she was celebrated during her lifetime, Rossetti received little attention in the first half of the twentieth century. It was only with the influence of feminist literary criticism in the 1970s that Rossetti was rediscovered and re-established as a central Victorian poet, and her poems, especially ‘Goblin Market’, now have a firm place in the literary canon.



‘Goblin Market’ and its context

‘Goblin Market’ tells the story of two sisters, Laura and Lizzie, and their twilight encounter with goblin merchants, who tempt them with their cries advertising luscious “orchard fruits”. While Lizzie resists, Laura succumbs to temptation, exchanging a lock of her golden hair for the “fruit forbidden”. At first, both sisters appear unchanged yet differences soon become apparent. Laura realises she can no longer hear the goblins’ cries – and thus buy and taste the fruit – and “her tree of life drooped from the root”. Her hair greys, and she deteriorates until she is “knocking at Death’s door”. Her sister returns to the goblins and offers to pay the goblins for more fruit, which she hopes will act as an antidote to Laura’s malady. The goblins attack Lizzie violently, smearing their fruits against her mouth in a vain attempt to make her eat (sometimes read as a rape scene). After the goblins are “worn out by her resistance”, Lizzie returns home, and Laura kisses the juices– which are now loathsome to her – from her sister’s face and all is restored. This “fiery antidote” has worked. The poem ends by looking forward to when Lizzie and Laura are wives with children. We see them all join hands and utter the poem’s supposed moral altogether.



*Christina Rossetti's
Goblin Market and
Other Poems with a
cover illustration by
her brother Dante
Gabriel Rossetti.*

‘Goblin Market’ has been aligned with a number of literary genres including the fairy tale, fable, gothic, fantasy and biblical. On its publication, the *Spectator* described the poem as “a true children’s poem”, yet Rossetti was not writing for children during this period and in 1862 wrote a letter (7 March) declining to contribute to a children’s book, commenting that “children are not among my suggestive subjects”.

Rossetti herself claimed that she “did not mean anything profound” by the poem, yet it has sparked numerous interpretations – as a rewriting of the creation myth from the book of Genesis, a commentary on consumerism, a tale about eating disorders, a feminist manifesto, and an exploration of lesbian love (to name but a few). It has influenced a number of successors including Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865).

Rossetti wrote ‘Goblin Market’ in 1859 while she was volunteering at the St Mary Magdalene Penitentiary in Highgate, which was dedicated to the reform and rehabilitation of prostitutes. Some critics have identified themes in the poem – temptation, sexual exchange and sisterly redemption – that reflect this, suggesting that Rossetti might have composed the poem with the intention of reading it aloud at the Penitentiary as a moral lesson or sympathetic narrative. Rossetti demonstrated an interest in ‘fallen women’ in her other writings, such as the poems ‘Cousin Kate’ (1862) and ‘The Iniquity of the Fathers upon the Children’ (1866), both of which centre on female characters who bear illegitimate offspring.

Perhaps the best known of Rossetti’s poems, ‘Goblin Market’ is also considered one of her most characteristically ‘Pre-Raphaelite’ works because of its painterly richness and pictorial details (reflected in the number of illustrations the work has prompted). It also appeals to the senses in other ways: particularly taste, in the (initially) enticing richness of the fruit, but also through sound, the exotic and intoxicating sound and rhythms of the poem itself.



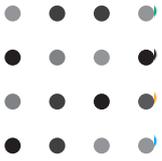
Reading 'Goblin Market'

Consider these lines from the start of the poem, which present the direct, reported speech of the goblins who speak in the strange language of Rossetti's poetry:

Come buy our orchard fruits,
Come buy, come buy:
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:
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. (3-31)



Gather Ye Rosebuds While Ye May, 1908, by John William Waterhouse – an example of a late Pre-Raphaelite painting.



Task 1

Individual or group work

As we can see from this passage, essentially a list, 'Goblin Market' is brimming with poetic devices and is notably experimental and unusual. Read this passage aloud a few times (which will help your understanding of the poem) and mark up your copy with the following devices:

- rhyme scheme (look out for rhymes which may occur quite far apart)
- different line lengths
- different rhythms
- stressed / unstressed syllables
- assonance
- alliteration
- repetition
- patterning
- internal rhyme
- enjambment
- mark the pauses and any other surprising effects that you notice

Discussion point

What is the effect of the abundance of poetic devices and irregular form?

Questions to consider

- What commands add to the urgency? Is it the commands that add to the urgency?
- Why is it such a long list?
- Do persuasive features create a sensual feel?



Task 2

Partner

Discuss with a partner why you think Rossetti chose the devices identified in the passage on page 4. What words or phrases are accentuated, changed, or drawn together through sound and their placement in the poem? What effect did they have on the way you read it aloud? (Rhyme and aspects of form can create surprising effects and relationships between words and images, which prose is sometimes unable to do.) How do form and content work together? What is being described with how it is being described?

One interesting way in which to read this passage is that the strangeness and richness of the form and language mimic that of the fruit, luscious and intoxicating; form and content are working together.

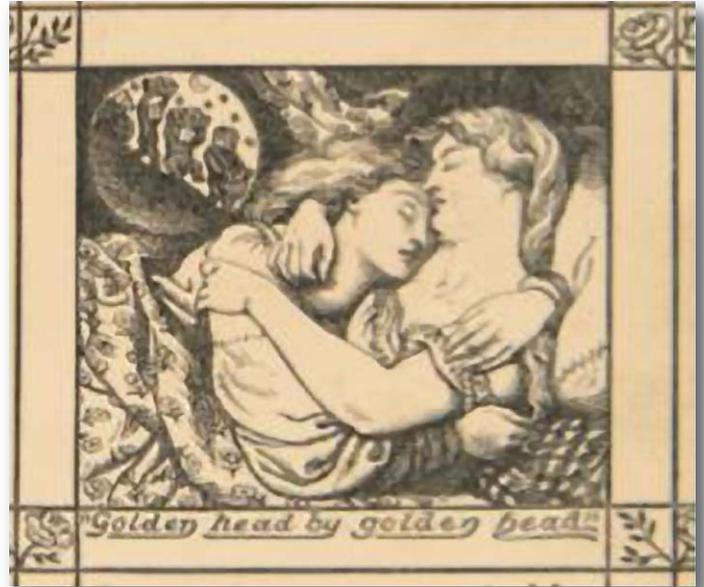




Task 3 Partner

Read aloud and look at the excerpt from ‘Goblin Market’, below right. This is the part of the poem where Laura has eaten the fruit, but the effects are not yet evident. In this way, the fruit suggests the temptations of poetry, we almost ‘taste’ the language. This reading is perhaps supported by the amount of references to hearing and speaking, mouths and lips in the poem, all of which are crucial to poetry of course. Some critics have read the poem as Rossetti’s own ‘transgression’ as a woman writer in the male-dominated Victorian artistic world, whereby writing the poem is akin to eating the forbidden fruit (see Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*). To critic Lorraine Kooistra, the poem is about interpretation itself. Referring to the passage above she writes that: “one sister interprets these material signs correctly; one does not.”

Discuss with your partner what Rossetti is trying to say about the sisters in the section of the poem below. Then look out for how the form (e.g. repetition, word order, line breaks, lists, line length, rhythm) supports and enhances this.



‘Golden Head by Golden Head’. Wood engraving by W.J. Linton after Dante Gabriel Rossetti, with corrections by Kate Faulkner. Collection of Stephen Calloway.

from ‘Goblin Market’

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-fall’n 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.



Task 4

Individual

Rossetti chose to write 'Goblin Market' as a narrative poem. To understand the particular opportunities offered by this poetic form, try changing it to another form entirely:

- Rewrite the poem in prose as a short story, or
- Tell it as a story, out loud, or
- Choose key scenes and create a (quick) cartoon

Before you start, think about

- What style will you choose? Fairy tale, folktale, morality tale, horror story..?
- What will you elaborate on or leave out?
- Will you set the poem in the Victorian era or today?
- What audience will you aim for? Children, teenagers, adults?
- Do you think Rossetti's poem has a moral? Will you accentuate this or change it?

Share your new creative work with a partner and discuss the following:

What are the key differences when you tell the poem in another form?

What techniques could you not use, or felt you used to less effect?

Do you feel like anything was lost? Or gained?

Are there any similarities in techniques between your story and Rossetti's poem?

Do you think your story has a moral? How would you summarise it? Do you think it is different to Rossetti's? Is it more or less obvious?



Literary critical theory

As A Level students, you need to consider a variety of critical thinking in relation to literary works. What are the different interpretations of Rossetti's poem? Would a feminist interpretation see this as a celebration of sisterhood or a presentation of the difficulties women faced at this time? Would a psychoanalytical interpretation see this as two aspects of one psyche or would it simply discuss the sexuality explored in the poem? Would a Marxist interpretation discuss how this presents the different domestic and commercial spheres of life? Below is a list of suggested further reading to help you explore literary critical theory in relation to Rossetti's work.

Bibliography

- Ian Buchanan, *Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2010)
- Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (Routledge, 2016) – chapters on Ideology, Gender Difference, Queer.
- Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, 1979), pp. 564-75
- Terrence Holt, "Men Sell Not Such in Any Town": Exchange in Goblin Market', *Victorian Poetry*, 28.1 (1990), 51-67
- Kristal Lysack, 'Goblin Markets: Victorian Women Shoppers at Liberty's Oriental Bazaar', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 27.2 (2005), 139-65
- Victor Roman Mendoza, "Come Buy": The Crossing of Sexual and Consumer Desire in Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market', *ELH*, 73.4 (2006), 913-47
- Lorraine Kooistra, 'Christina Rossetti' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Pre-Raphaelites*, ed. Elizabeth Prettejohn, Cambridge, 2012), pp. 164-82

This resource was commissioned by Watts Gallery Trust and The Poetry Society and written by Dr Bethan Roberts with additional material from The Poetry Society.

About the author

Dr Bethan Roberts is the William Noble research fellow at University of Liverpool. Her research interests include: women's writing; form and literary history; Romanticism, nature writing and birds in literature and science. Her book *Charlotte Smith: Place, Tradition and Form in the Late Eighteenth Century* is forthcoming (Liverpool University Press) and she is current researching nightingales in literary history and writing *Nightingale* for the 'animal' series from Reaktion Press.

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