

Goblin Market as Children's Literature and Adult Allegory

Goblin Market occupies a unique and fascinating position in Victorian literature because it functions simultaneously as a children's poem and a complex adult allegory. On the surface, it resembles a fairy tale filled with goblins, magical fruit, rhythmic repetition, and a clear moral lesson. Yet beneath this seemingly simple narrative lies a dense web of meanings dealing with temptation, sexuality, consumerism, female desire, and redemption. Rossetti's genius lies in her ability to address two audiences at once: children, who respond to the poem's story and moral clarity, and adults, who recognise its symbolic depth and psychological intensity.

Goblin Market as Children's Literature

At first glance, Goblin Market strongly resembles a nursery or fairy-tale poem. Its narrative structure is simple and linear: two sisters encounter goblins, one succumbs to temptation, suffers, and is eventually saved by the other. This pattern closely mirrors traditional moral tales designed for children, in which curiosity leads to danger and obedience leads to safety.

The poem's musical rhythm and repetition make it particularly accessible to young readers. Lines such as:

"Come buy, come buy"

and the long catalogues of fruit—

"Apples and quinces,

Lemons and oranges,

Plump unpecked cherries"

—create a chant-like quality that appeals to a child's ear. The exaggerated abundance of fruit, the animal-like goblins, and the clear distinction between good and evil resemble the conventions of oral storytelling and folklore.

Moreover, the poem offers a clear moral lesson, which is a hallmark of children's literature. The fate of Jeanie, who tasted the fruit and died, and Laura's subsequent suffering function as warnings against disobedience and indulgence. By the end of the poem, the moral is explicitly stated:

"For there is no friend like a sister

In calm or stormy weather."

Such direct moralising aligns Goblin Market with Victorian didactic poetry for children, where lessons about obedience, restraint, and familial love were central.

Importantly, the poem avoids graphic explanation when read at a literal level. For a child, the goblin fruit is simply dangerous food, and the goblins are frightening creatures similar to witches or trolls. The poem can therefore be enjoyed innocently as a story about listening to warnings, resisting temptation, and valuing family bonds.

Goblin Market as Adult Allegory

While the poem works effectively as a children's tale, its sensuous language and symbolic complexity reveal a deeper meaning aimed at adult readers. The lush descriptions of fruit are not merely decorative but charged with erotic and psychological significance. The act of eating becomes a metaphor for forbidden desire:

“She sucked and sucked and sucked the more

Fruits which that unknown orchard bore.”

For adult readers, this language evokes sexual appetite, addiction, and loss of self-control. The goblin market itself can be read as an allegory of Victorian capitalism, where desire is manipulated through seductive display and relentless marketing. The goblins' cries resemble commercial advertising, tempting consumers into destructive consumption.

The poem also operates as a Christian allegory. Laura's fall parallels the Biblical story of Eve, while Lizzie's redemptive act echoes Christ-like sacrifice. Lizzie endures violence without yielding and returns “smeared” with juice that becomes the means of salvation for her sister. Her invitation—

“Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices”

—resembles a sacramental act, recalling the Eucharist. This theological symbolism would have been readily recognised by adult Victorian readers familiar with Christian doctrine.

In addition, the poem lends itself to a feminist allegorical reading. The goblin men represent predatory male sexuality and patriarchal exploitation, while Laura and Lizzie inhabit a female-centred moral universe. Notably, no male figure rescues Laura; salvation comes entirely through female solidarity. In a society where women were often depicted as morally weak and dependent, Rossetti presents women as agents of both fall and redemption.

The Dual Audience and Narrative Strategy

What makes *Goblin Market* exceptional is not simply that it contains allegory, but that Rossetti deliberately structures the poem to accommodate multiple levels of interpretation. Children are drawn to the story, rhythm, and moral clarity, while adults are unsettled by the intensity of the imagery and the ambiguity of desire.

Rossetti never explicitly explains the poem's symbolism. This allows the poem to remain "safe" as children's literature while offering rich interpretive possibilities for adults. The goblins are never clearly defined, the fruit is unnamed beyond its sensory appeal, and the moral danger is felt rather than explained. This ambiguity ensures that adult readers must actively interpret the poem rather than passively receive a lesson.

The ending reinforces this duality. On the surface, the poem concludes in domestic harmony, with Laura as a wife and mother teaching her children a simple moral. Yet for adult readers, this closure raises questions about containment and compromise—whether the radical female solidarity of the poem is being safely enclosed within conventional domestic ideology.

Why the Dual Nature Matters

The coexistence of children's literature and adult allegory is not accidental. It reflects Victorian anxieties about education, morality, and female desire. By disguising serious themes beneath a fairy-tale surface, Rossetti was able to explore taboo subjects without overtly challenging social norms.

This dual nature also explains the poem's enduring appeal. Readers often first encounter *Goblin Market* as a charming story, only to discover its deeper meanings later. The poem thus mirrors the process of growing up itself: innocence gives way to experience, and simple stories acquire complex significance over time.

Conclusion

Goblin Market is a remarkable example of a text that functions simultaneously as children's literature and adult allegory. Its fairy-tale narrative, musical language, and explicit moral make it accessible to young readers, while its sensuous imagery, religious symbolism, and social critique speak powerfully to adults. Christina Rossetti's achievement lies in her ability to sustain this balance without diminishing either mode. As a result, *Goblin Market* remains a richly layered poem that rewards rereading across different stages of life, proving that a children's story can also be a profound meditation on desire, danger, and redemption.