

**The Double Life of Christina Rossetti:  
Sex and Religion in "The Goblin Market"**

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Underneath the fantastic childish tale about two sisters and their encounter with goblin brothers, Christina Rossetti's "The Goblin Market" embodies a symbolic depiction of Rossetti's double life as the writer of sensuous, subversive poetry and as the quiet, chaste, religious ascetic. The role of doubles or split identities clearly operates in the poem, as shown by the relationship between the sisters, Laura and Lizzie. Even more significant is Laura and Lizzie's characterization of Rossetti's own dualistic nature: good versus evil, pure versus defiled, and most outstandingly, the narrow external world of existence versus the soaring imagination of a powerful woman writer.

The subject of the dualistic self pervades in Rossetti's life as well as in her poetry. William Sharp, biographer for Rossetti's brother Dante, mentions how "she, like her brother, was fascinated by the Doppelganger legend."<sup>1</sup> The Doppelganger, a name coined by Jean Paul Richter in his novel Siebenkas, or Double, as rendered in English, is a second self who does not necessarily bear the physical similarities of the first self. It can be a duplication of "either physical or psychological or both,"<sup>2</sup> meaning that it is what differentiates the outer physical self from the inner psychological self. Most often, the Double shares superficial features, but its role in the drama of life diverges from the first self. The important distinction between the pair of Doubles is that the first self "is the relatively naive self, naive at least in tending to suppose that he is the whole self, for he seldom has any conscious knowledge, until it is forced upon him. The second self is the intruder from the background of shadows, and however prominent he may become he always tend to remain half-shadowed...the exact nature of his motivation, are always left in comparative obscurity."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Barbara Garlick, "Christina Rossetti and the Gender Politics of Fantasy," Kath Filmer, ed., The Victorian Fantasists: Essays on Culture, Society and Belief in the Mythopoeic Fiction of the Victorian Age, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1991, pp. 135.

<sup>2</sup>C.F. Keppler, The Literature of the Second Self, The University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 1972, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, p. 3

Certain aspects of Rossetti's life were indeed obscured and mysterious. Described as a person who "governed herself by strict religious principles, giving up theater, opera, and chess,"<sup>4</sup> Rossetti wrote poetry that was seemingly incompatible with her lifestyle. However, Rossetti's life contained moments that were not devoted to the self-denial of fleshly pleasures nor reflected by her calm and subdued disposition. Rossetti as a young child was "willful and passionate, and William, her other brother said: 'In innate character she was vivacious, and open to pleasurable impressions; and during her girlhood, one might readily have supposed that she would develop into a woman of expansive heart, fond of society, and diversions, and taking a part in them of more than average brilliancy.'" However he added, "What came to pass was of course quite the contrary."<sup>5</sup> Biographer Kathleen Jones states, "Christina was by nature rebellious, passionate and spontaneous, and these qualities did not fit very well with Victorian notions of feminine meekness and submission." The extreme ends at which laid Rossetti's innate character and the rigid demands of Victorian society for women "was partially responsible for the spiritual and emotional maiming of Christina, brought up as she was by her mother in the English evangelical tradition."<sup>6</sup>

Rossetti's mother, Frances Polidori, exerted a strong influence on her daughter. In almost each of her books, Rossetti wrote the dedication to her mother, who was described as "My Beloved Example, Friend." Furthermore, Frances Polidori "seems to have bequeathed to her youngest child a compelling need to reconcile an unconventional 'passion for intellect' with an almost ascetic religious pietism."<sup>7</sup> Perhaps this was the way in which Rossetti's passionate, sexual energies were channeled into a 'passion for intellect,' namely in writing and poetry, so as to conform to her mother's (and in a greater sense, society's) standard of feminine purity. However, this resolution was not reached without any suffering on Rossetti's part. Rossetti, half Italian and

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<sup>4</sup>M.H. Abrams, ed., The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Sixth Edition, Volume 2, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1993, p. 1472.

<sup>5</sup>Frances Thomas, Christina Rossetti, Worcester, The Self Publishing Association Ltd., 1992, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup>Kathleen Jones, Learning Not to be First: The Life of Christina Rossetti, The Windrush Press, Gloucestershire, 1991, pp. 9-10.

<sup>7</sup>Nina Auerbach and U.C. Knoepfelmacher, eds., Forbidden Journeys: Fairy Tales and Fantasies by Victorian Women Writers, University of Chicago, Chicago, 1992, p. 365.

English, is seen in interesting parallel with Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, who describes "the effect of an English education on the Italian temperament as being 'pricked to a pattern with a pin', the metaphor aptly conveying the pain of the process as well as one of the methods used to train young women to obedience."<sup>8</sup>

The allusion to pain arising from repression frequently comes up in the imagery of "The Goblin Market." Here, Laura, representative of the youthful, rebellious nature within Rossetti, is suffering from withdrawal of the addictive goblin fruits and also from the knowledge that she will never again experience the ecstasy that accompanies the consumption.

Her tree of life drooped from the root:  
She said not one word in her heart's sore ache;  
But peering thro' the dimness, nought discerning,  
Trudged home, her pitcher dripping all the way;  
So crept to bed, and lay  
Silent till Lizzie slept;  
Then sat up in passionate yearning,  
And gnashed her teeth for baulked desire, and wept.<sup>9</sup>

In life, Rossetti's repressed passion occasionally surfaced into violence. For instance, Rossetti once slashed her arm "with a pair of scissors when reproved by her mother."<sup>10</sup> Kathleen Jones translates this violent episode as typical of the repressed passion among female Victorian writers and in their creations, such as Charlotte Bronte's Red Room in *Jane Eyre* and George Eliot's Red Deeps in *The Mill on the Floss*. She continues, "The nineteenth-century poet Alice Meynell in one of her essays wrote that 'Red is not the colour of life, it is the colour of violence,' but a concealed violence - 'the colour of blood under the skin...In the case of women, it is of the living and unpublished blood.'" Furthermore, "Emily Bronte projected her own interior violence into *Wuthering Heights*; Christina repressed it, crushing it far down into her psyche and only occasionally does it well up into passionate, terrible poetry."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Jones, *Op. Cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup>Christina Rossetti, "The Goblin Market," *Abrams, Op. Cit.*, p. 1484.

<sup>10</sup>Jones, *Op. Cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid*

In "The Goblin Market," violence occurs in a rape-like scene in which Laura resists the physical coercion by the goblin men.

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.<sup>12</sup>

Images of bondage and sodomy allude to the conditions Christina Rossetti and other contemporary women had to struggle with as writers who were highly conscious and critical of the patriarchal Victorian society which surrounds them. Feminist critic Barbara Garlick notes that "The Goblin Market" was "predicated on Rossetti's recognition of the patriarchal imperialism within the visual and written texts against which she was writing."<sup>13</sup> Likewise, another writer observes,

"Modern feminist scholarship has placed Christina's poetry firmly within the 'aesthetics of renunciation'...and has focused on the subversive elements in the 'Goblin Market' and in her poetry where her articulation of the central conflict of the woman writer in the nineteenth century. [...] Dora Greenwell stated that her own aim was to 'bring her external existence into harmony with her inner life.' In Christina's case this was achieved at the expense of her inner life; it was the external existence of religious ritual, conformity and submission that won. Germaine Greer in a 1975 edition of *Goblin Market*, asserted that Christina was 'appalled by the uncontrollable violence of her own nature' and suppressed her emotions, using her 'piety as a metaphor for her own frustrated sexuality.'"<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Rossetti, *Op. Cit.*, p. 1487. There is an interesting Biblical parallel here; Song of Solomon 5:7: "The watchmen that went about the city found me, they smote me, they wounded me; the keepers of the walls took away my veil from me." This and all future Biblical references are taken from The King James Version.

<sup>13</sup>Garlick, *Op. Cit.*, p. 133.

<sup>14</sup>Jones, *Op. Cit.*, p. 232.

The contrasting themes of sex and religion<sup>15</sup> symbolize Rossetti's conflict in "The Goblin Market." The interaction between sexual pleasures and religious stringency is significant, as John Maynard muses, "But what of their linkage? Why that garden story, which won't leave us, still joining nakedness, love, temptation, and our mortal and immortal destinies - despite all efforts of theologians to separate the sin from the sex?"<sup>16</sup> Laura and Lizzie, the counterparts for sexual sin and purity, are joined in intimate and sensual embrace: "Cheek to cheek and breast to breast/ Locked together in one nest."<sup>17</sup> Even during a time of crisis at the Eden-like glen of the goblins, "With clasping arms and cautioning lips/ With tingling cheeks and finger tips," the two sisters are initially merged as one, as was the young Rossetti of one mind and character.

The separation of Laura and Lizzie begins with Laura's succumbing to her desires of eating the 'forbidden fruit.'

Lizzie with an open heart,  
Laura in an absent dream,  
One content, one sick in part;  
One warbling for the mere bright day's delight,  
One longing for the night.<sup>18</sup>

The contrast between contentment and sickness, lightness and darkness, the "temptress in Eve" and "female purity in the Virgin Mary,"<sup>19</sup> seems to suggest the struggle between the two forces within Rossetti. One critic writes of Rossetti, "What Christina wrote was not a direct account of her conscious thought, but dreams and longings which did not normally break into her life but lay locked in unexplored corners of her soul." Hence, Laura and Lizzie can be seen as instruments of Rossetti's consciousness, allowing the reader to find the true nature of which cannot be directly expressed. In this sense, the combination of sex and religion in "The Goblin Market" represents

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<sup>15</sup>When I speak of religion, I specifically mean the Judeo-Christian religion, in which sex and sin are almost synonymous. This is in recognition of other Eastern religions where sex is a ritual of religion.

<sup>16</sup>John Maynard, Victorian Discourses on Sexuality and Religion. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup>Rossetti, *Op. Cit.*, p. 1483.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>Robert Rogers, A Psychoanalytic Study of the Double in Literature, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1970, p. 127.

"the double-voiced discourse of women's writing, where explicit theological orthodoxy becomes implicit social rebellion."<sup>20</sup>

From the beginning of the poem, the strong sexual atmosphere is stressed by the fact that specifically "maids" or virgins "heard the goblins cry." Moreover,

Figs to fill your mouth,  
Citrons from the South,  
Sweet to tongue and sound to eye;  
Come buy, come buy.<sup>21</sup>

reminds us of the Biblical description of the female temptress: "For the lips of a strange woman drop as a honeycomb, and her mouth is smoother than oil."<sup>22</sup> The invitation ("Come buy, come buy") has also a strong parallel with the prostitute's invitation to a sexual feast.

I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon.  
Come, let us take our fill of love until the morning.<sup>23</sup>

A "feast" is also later mentioned by the goblin men, who invites Lizzie to "take a seat with us, Honour and eat with us...Our feast is but beginning."<sup>24</sup> Evidently, this feast is sexual and forbidden ("No, no, no; Their offers should not charm us, Their evil gifts would harm us"<sup>25</sup>), as demonstrated by Laura's feeding behavior.

She dropped a tear more rare than pearl,  
Then sucked their fruit globes fair or red:  
Sweeter than honey from the rock.  
Stronger than man-rejoicing wine<sup>26</sup>

The physical pain of first sexual intercourse, and the sucking, as opposed to the plain 'eating', of genitalia ("She sucked and sucked and sucked the more...She sucked until her lips were sore"), the delight of which exceeds the pleasure in consuming the things provided by God, such as the

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<sup>20</sup>Christine Krueger, The Reader's Repentance: Women Preachers, Women Writers, and Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup>Rossetti, Op. Cit., p. 1479.

<sup>22</sup>Proverbs 5:3

<sup>23</sup>Proverbs 7:17-18

<sup>24</sup>Rossetti, Op. Cit., p. 1486.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, p. 1480.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid, p. 1481.

sweet water that miraculously issued from a rock during the Israelites' pilgrimage to the promised land.<sup>27</sup> This juxtaposition of sex and religion is one of the most evident in the poem.

There are also other instances where the two themes come in view of each other. The following lines about the 'leering' goblin brothers bring into mind the platter on which carried the head of John the Baptist:

One bears a plate,  
One lugs a golden dish  
Of many pounds weight<sup>28</sup>

It is interesting to note that John's execution was related to his publicly condemning Herod of Antipas' adulterous relationship with his sister-in-law.<sup>29</sup> In this case, it is the sexual half which defeats his puritan counterpart. In another example,

One began to weave a crown,  
Of tendrils, leaves and rough nuts brown<sup>30</sup>

suggests the 'crown of thorns' that was woven for Jesus prior to his crucifixion. Likewise, the goblins weave a crown for Laura, the pain of which is not known until the cherished goblin fruits are taken away from her. Moreover, there is the strong parallelism between the pain of the thorns and with Rossetti being "pricked to a pattern."

Like the prostitute who washes Jesus' feet with her tears and wins his forgiveness of her sins<sup>31</sup>, so does Laura try to redeem herself by planting the "kernel-stone" that had been left over from her fruity feast, and "Dewed it with tears, hoped for a root," however in vain. She tries to free herself from the agony of sexual withdrawal by desperately searching to indulge in more; yet this form of redemption does not come about. Instead, Laura's redemption lies in the struggle between good and evil. The first stanza of "The Goblin Market" is filled with imagery of luscious

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<sup>27</sup>Exodus 17:6

<sup>28</sup>Rossetti, p. 1480.

<sup>29</sup>The Gospel of Matthew 14:3-8

<sup>30</sup>Rossetti, p. 1481.

<sup>31</sup>This incident is recorded in The Gospel of Luke 7:37-38, "And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster box of ointment, and stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment."



fruits, which is highly sexual in itself, and the variety and abundance of which reminds us of the Garden of Eden. Its implication to the loss of innocence, divine rejection, and the conquest of evil, all make "the image of the lost Eden...a crucial one in Christina's poetry."<sup>32</sup> Yet, a lost Eden also calls for one to be regained, and the struggle of good to conquer the evil once more.

This is where the role of the Double comes into the spotlight of the poem. Carl Keppler in The Literature of the Second Self, describes the various types of doubles that are found in literature. These include the second self as twin brother, as pursuer, as tempter, as vision of horror, as the beloved and, most crucially for Rossetti's poem, as savior. In "The Goblin Market," Lizzie is both Laura's Double and savior, the significance of which lies in the fact that "both birth and death are associated with doubles. It was commonly believed that any man who saw his double, or 'wraith,' was about to die."<sup>33</sup> The last few lines of the poem also point to the Double-as-Savior theme.

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.<sup>34</sup>

The 1993 foreign movie, "The Double Life of Veronique," directed by Krzysztof Kieslowski (from which, as you might have already noticed, I had derived the title of this paper) provides a lucid example of the Double as savior. According to the plot, Polish Veronica senses that she has a second self, someone who looks like her, acts like her, and even shares her name. A few countries away, five-year-old French Veronique almost burned her hand by curiously reaching out for the hot stove. However, by some sudden impulse, she shrunk back in time (later, we find out that her Double, Veronica, had her hand burned by a stove when she was also five). When the grown-up Veronique visits Poland on a class trip, Veronica sees Veronique and longs for her recognition as the Double; however, Veronique is totally oblivious of Veronica's existence.

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<sup>32</sup>Thomas, Op. Cit., p. 24.

<sup>33</sup>Rogers, Op. Cit., p. 9.

<sup>34</sup>Rossetti, Op. Cit., p. 1490.

All that she will ever capture from her encounter with Veronica is a single camera snapshot which Veronique had randomly taken while departing Poland.

What happens next is the climax of the plot: Veronica, an aspiring choral singer, is warned by her doctor of a heart condition that can prove fatal if she continues to sing. In her excitement in getting the lead soloist part of the next performance, she ignores the doctor's warning. After five minutes into her performance, she drops dead on stage. While Veronica dies, her Double is in bed with her lover. However, she suddenly leaves the bed and, as if by instinct, mourns for Veronica's death. Also a singer herself, Veronique instinctively goes to her doctor and receives the same warning message. Unlike her Polish counterpart, Veronique gives up singing. At this point in time, Veronique still only has the slightest sense of Veronica's existence (or former existence). It is not until she looks through her pictures of Poland that she recognizes a girl who looks identical to her, whose searching eyes triggers a psychological revelation within Veronique. She finally breaks down in grief and acknowledges her Double as savior.

Similarly, as Veronica dies while Veronique is having sex, Lizzie suffers and 'dies' for Laura, who is in agony from the lack of sex. Lizzie's confrontation with the goblins also involves sexual temptation. The goblin men "Hugged her and kissed her, Squeezed and caressed her."

They ejaculate

Look at our apples  
Russet and dun  
Bob at our cherries,  
Bite at our peaches...  
Pluck them and suck them<sup>35</sup>

The goblins invite Lizzie to join in the orgy and to perform oral sex on them. However, Lizzie refuses and is 'raped' by the goblins. Lizzie stands "White and gold" against the goblins, "Like a royal virgin town/ Topped with gilded dome and spire."<sup>36</sup> This castle-like imagery resembles the one that is used to describe a beautiful maiden whom King Solomon tries to seduce into his bed.

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid, p. 1486.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid, p. 1487.

She responds to him, "I am a wall, and my breasts like towers."<sup>37</sup> No matter how the goblins tried to overcome her and enter the "royal virgin town," Lizzie would "not open lip from lip," both the lips of her mouth and of her vagina.

The goblins, realizing they have failed to conquer Lizzie, leave her battered, bruised and dripping with semen or the juices of the goblin fruits. Lizzie runs home to the dying Laura and, as the Biblical God also "began his relation with us by a form of intimate succitation,"<sup>38</sup> exclaims

Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices  
Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,  
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.  
Eat me, drink me, love me;  
Laura, make much of me:  
For your sake I have braved the glen  
And had to do with goblin merchant men.<sup>39</sup>

Hence Lizzie, "by inviting her sister to eat her flesh and 'suck her juices' promises Laura new life."<sup>40</sup> As Eve eats the forbidden fruit and Christ suffers to redeem mankind from sin and death, Laura's consumption of bitter fruit and its results are counteracted by Lizzie offering herself for sacrifice. Rossetti asks, "Is it death or is it life?" She provides the answer for herself, "Life out of death."<sup>41</sup>

After Laura's pain reaches an orgasmic climax and falls into calm submission ("She fell at last; Pleasure past and anguish past"), she joins her Double in leading an ordinary life as wife and mother. Laura as the fallen woman, the woman chained to sexual desires, dies and merges with Lizzie who gives her new life as a 'good' Victorian woman. The second to last stanza of poem depicts a paradise regained.

Indeed, "The Goblin Market" reveals "the limits of human culture and control, the experiences of blood and death in sacrifice."<sup>42</sup> As with most of Rossetti's stories, it "challenges a

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<sup>37</sup>Song of Solomon 8:10

<sup>38</sup>Maynard, Op. Cit., p. 9.

<sup>39</sup>Rossetti, Op. Cit., p. 1488.

<sup>40</sup>Jones, Op. Cit., p. 98.

<sup>41</sup>Rossetti, Op. Cit., p. 1489.

<sup>42</sup>Maynard, Op. Cit., p. 10.

series of nostrums Victorian adults questioned at their peril: the virtue of economic paternalism, the immorality of individuality, the evil of the solitary imagination, the salvation of engulfment by family life."<sup>43</sup> For Rossetti, her 'salvation' was based on her total immersion into her family and religion, and it is 'the evil of her solitary imagination' that haunts her. However, "The Goblin Market" serves much more than Rossetti's autobiographical note, as Garlick observes in the ending of the poem, "The bland spoken phrases are a reversion to the pieties...rather than a summing-up of the vigorous life we had seen enacted in the rest of the poem. The result is an angry poem in which woman is both active subject, and fetishised object of the gaze and the machinations of the goblins like the women in the fairy paintings of the period...Unlike her place in the visual world of fantasy where female decision is inappropriate and passivity is emphasized, Laura/Lizzie controls the male marketplace which her linguistic energy creates."<sup>44</sup>

Hence, the power of the poem is in its protest. Rossetti's subversive appeal is based on several hidden agendas, such as the woman's reluctance to be 'redeemed' from sin and death as defined by the patriarchal institution, the bestial sexuality in human instinct, and the vampiristic behavior of paternalism and imperialism. The blatant sexuality in the poem and the self-denying lifestyle of the poet reinforce the power of her writing. By the clever use of metaphors and allegory, Rossetti was able "to write against the dominant mode rather than to speak out overtly,"<sup>45</sup> which once more stresses her dualistic character. Her strategy of subversion was so outstanding, in that Virginia Woolf observes, "Your eye, indeed, observed with a sensual pre-Raphaelite intensity that must have surprised Christina the Anglo-Catholic. But to her you owed perhaps the fixity and sadness of your muse....No sooner have you feasted on beauty with your eyes than your mind tells you that beauty is vain and beauty passes. Death, oblivion, and rest lap round your songs with their dark wave."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Auerbach and Knoepfelmacher, p. 130.

<sup>44</sup>Garlick, Op. Cit., p. 144.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid, p. 149.

<sup>46</sup>Abrams, Op. Cit., p. 1473.

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