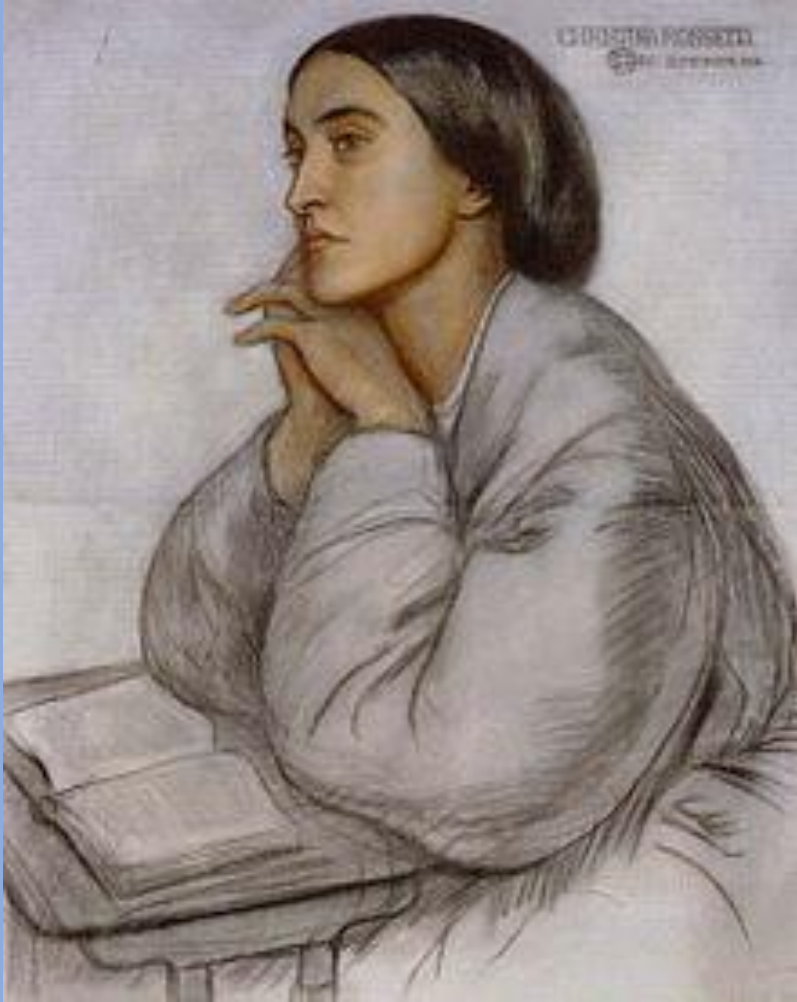


Christina Rossetti



“The Goblin Market”





Photo of the Rossetti Family by Lewis Carroll (penname of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson).

Discussion Questions:

Christina Rossetti's "The Goblin Market" raises as many interpretations as there are readers. Below you'll find some things to consider.

The poem's narrative follows a paradigm which scholars call the *Bildungsroman*, a German word meaning a "novel of formation." Familiar to readers from myriad literary works (think novels by Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, but also Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*), the *Bildungsroman* follows the experiences of characters as they move from childhood innocence to adult knowledge. Along the way, they gain an understanding of good and evil, of love and sexuality, and of proper behavior for an "adult" in the world. What elements of the *Bildungsroman* appear in "Goblin Market"?





The world of the poem (one in which eating magical fruit leads to death) works by a logic different from our “real” world. In that sense, the poem functions according to “fairy tale logic,” reminiscent of fables like those by the brothers Grimm or tales like *1001 Arabian Nights*. What other fairy tale elements can you identify among the poem’s setting, characters, conflicts, actions, themes, and resolution? What fairy tales does “Goblin Market” remind you of? Do fairy tales affect you differently as a reader than “realistic” stories? Why?

Rossetti's poem raises various gender issues. What does the poem say about nurturing? So-called "maternal instincts"? Female friendships? The nature of families and family bonds? The relationship between the two sisters?



Readers often have a gendered view of heroism, one in which active, rational men save passive, emotional women from danger. Quite the opposite occurs here, however. Lizzie endures pain and uses reason and discipline to save Laura. What might the poem say about female heroism? How might you define it? How might it differ from male heroism?



Some read "Goblin Market" in the context of the Victorian era's so-called "Fallen Woman" narrative, stories in which women who engage in premarital sex suffer banishment and even death.

Christina volunteered at the St. Mary Magdalene Penitentiary in Highgate, an institution dedicated to aiding so-called "fallen" women, and she understood how women could help each other.





Sentimental philosophers of the eighteenth century believed that people relied on empathy and sympathy to decide on ethical actions. We empathize when we imagine ourselves in another's circumstances (walk a mile in their shoes), while we sympathize when we consider another's situation in comparison with our own.

Imagine that you encounter a starving child. First, you empathetically put yourself in the child's position and realize how awful hunger feels. Then you adopt a sympathetic position and compare the child's situation with your own. Finally, you decide on an action: presumably after empathetically experiencing the child's hunger and sympathetically feeling sorry for the child, you act to alleviate that hunger and provide food.

The goblins, however, do not act in this way. They realize their fruit causes suffering, but do not care how it affects others. Why not? Are they simply evil? If so, what does that mean in this context? What does it say about the ethical universe the goblins inhabit?

What about those goblins? What might they signify? Beyond their coins, they do not appear to benefit from the girls eating their fruit, yet they desire it strongly. Do they mindlessly destroy those who eat? What agenda do you believe the goblins pursue?

Some see money as the goblins' motivation. After all, they do receive payment for the fruit and struggle terribly to avoid returning Lizzie the coins she has given them. Might you interpret the poem as an allegory of political economy, in which some buy, some sell, some profit, and some suffer?





Behavioral psychologists point out that people assess the consequences of immediate actions more accurately than those of actions whose consequences appear far in the future.

Should I spend money now on something immediately pleasurable or should I save money for my retirement, which may be many years away? Should I take pleasure in eating a cookie now or delay gratification knowing that I may lead a longer and healthier life in the future.

How do the characters in Goblin Market decide what to do? How do they think of present pleasures and future consequences? How do you make important decisions?

The poem raises an interesting issue of the girls' relationship to authority. After all, no one has explicitly told them not to eat the fruit. Still, they know from the death of Jeanie the dangers of the fruit. In that sense, their actions – Laura to eat and Lizzie to save her – demonstrate their free will. What does the poem say about actions and responsibilities? How does the world of the poem resemble our “real” world?

The poem presents a tension between reason and superstition. From their knowledge of the experiences of Jeanie, who dies after eating the fruit, the girls know it can prove dangerous. When Laura goes forward and eats the fruit anyway, she becomes ill. Instead of dying, though, her sister's actions save her. In a sense, Lizzie figures out the rules that prevent Laura's death and allow her redemption. How does she do this? What are those rules?





Rossetti presents us with a narrative of risks and rewards, the risks of possible sickness and death vs the definite reward of instant gratification and pleasure.

The poem makes this decision appear obvious, and we might condemn Lizzie for her actions, but all of us have one time or another done something we knew wasn't wise and yet we did it anyway. Why did we do it? How did it turn out?

What processes do you use to assess risks and make decisions? Are you always reasonable, acting according to common sense? Do you act impulsively, according to your emotions?

Did we accept the consequences if things went badly? Did we learn something from the experience?



Quite literally, the poem tells the tale of the sisters' journey as they go to purchase the goblins' fruit. Travel narratives have entertained readers from antiquity to the present, relating the experiences of new people, places, ethics, and dangers. What elements does "Goblin Market" share with tales of travel and adventure? How does travel from one place to another change perspectives and enrich or threaten understanding?



For those wishing to pursue religious themes, some critics read “Goblin Market” in theological terms. For one thing, the poem presents a series of actions reminiscent of the story of Adam and Eve.

After all, Laura knows she should not eat the fruit, undergoes temptation to do so, suffers the consequences of her actions, only to be redeemed by Lizzie. Moreover, Lizzie may appear as a Christological figure who suffers to redeem Laura.

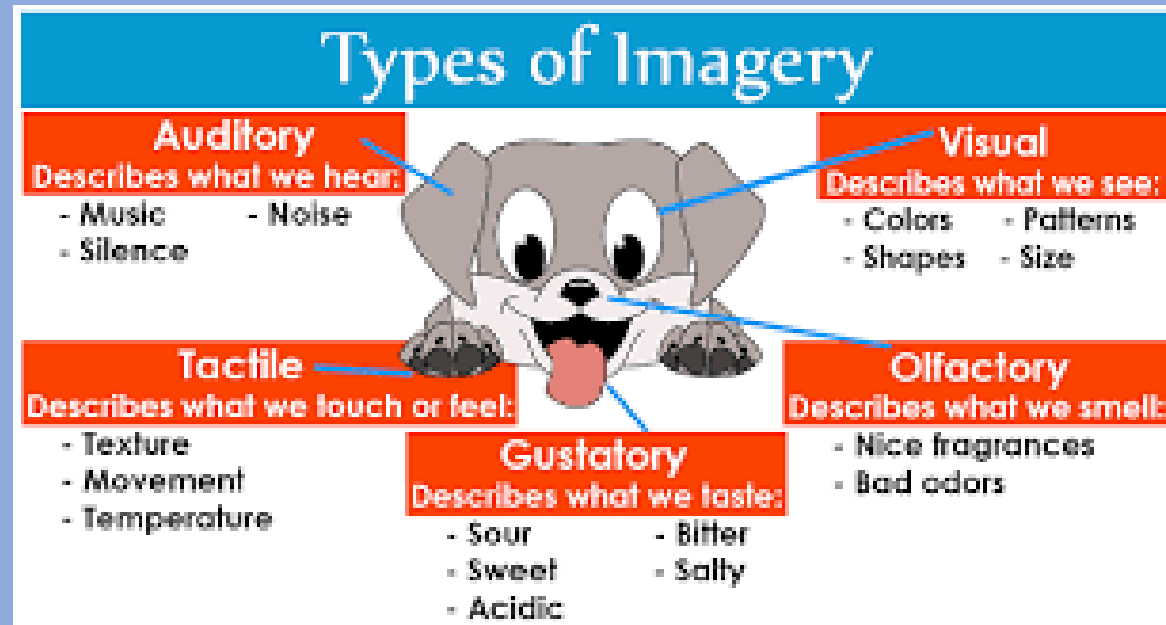
What do you think? How does the poem’s ending affect this reading.

One moral dilemma the poem raises recalls the Biblical question: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” On the one hand, Lizzie feels responsible for her sister. On the other hand, of course, Laura has made her decision to eat the fruit knowing full well the dangers that eating it poses. Does Lizzie make the right decision?

When analyzing the end of the poem, what – if any – lesson does it appear that Laura has learned from her experiences? What lesson do you as the reader draw from the story?



Readers find “The Goblin Market” rich in symbolism. The sensuality of the fruit and its consumption connects it with sexuality, sexual identity, pleasure, temptation, or, more generally, to sin. What do you think the fruit symbolizes?



Scholars often discuss the metrics of Rossetti's poems, especially "The Goblin Market." The critic John Ruskin condemned the poem's irregular verse, but others have praised her variable syllabic lines, which range from four to eight syllables, sometimes rhyming, often not.

What do you think of the poem's verses? How do the musicality of the metrics (the number of syllables per line, the variation of stressed and unstressed syllables) and the rhymes affect your understanding of the poem's themes?

Analyze the poem's metrics using the "feet" here. How does the poem's form affect your response to its content?

Feet: Names and Stress

iambic foot = . /

trochaic foot = / .

anapestic foot = . . /

dactylic foot = / . .

spondaic foot = / /

pyrrhic foot = . .

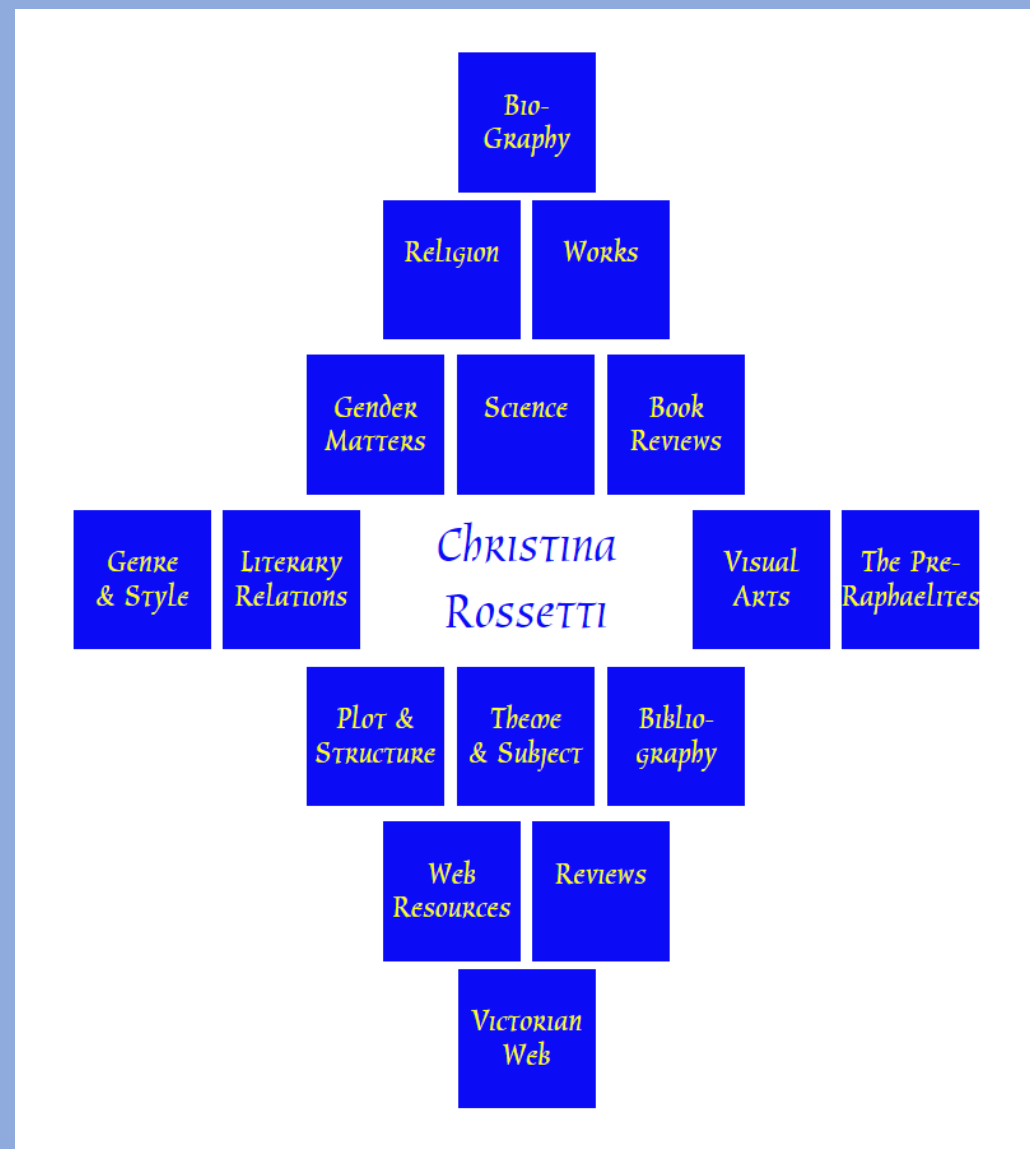
Websites

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/christina-rossetti>

British Library: Posters, newspapers, illustrations and much more, along with expert articles. (www.bl.uk/victorian-britain).

Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century: A respected, open-access, peer-reviewed scholarly journal covering areas like Romantic and Victorian History, Literature, Musicology, Social History, Visual Culture, etc. (<https://19.bbk.ac.uk/>).

Victorian History Resources: Elon University's fine site. (elon.libguides.com/Victorian_History/Internet_Resources).



<https://victorianweb.org/authors/crossetti/index.html>

Christina Rossetti: A Chronology



The Victorian Web

literature, history, & culture in
the age of Victoria



[[Victorian Web Home](#) → [Authors](#) → [Christina Rossetti](#) → [Works](#) → [Theme and Subject](#) → [Image, Symbol, and Motif](#)]

1830	Born in London, to Gabriele and Frances (Polidori) Rossetti.
1848	Engaged to James Collinson , a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood ; the engagement is canceled in 1850 when he converts to Roman Catholicism .
1853	Her father retires, due to his failing health. Christina and her mother attempt to start a day school, which they give up within a year.
1862	Publishes Goblin Market and Other Poems .
1866	Publishes <i>The Prince's Progress and Other Poems</i> . Rejects marriage proposal from Charles Cayley, who "was not a Christian."
1870	Publishes <i>Commonplace and Other Stories</i> .
1871	Publishes <i>A Pageant and Other Poems</i> .
1894	Dies.
1896	<i>New Poems</i> published posthumously.

<https://victorianweb.org/authors/crossetti/rossettiti.html>



Introductory Material

- Introduction
- Pre-Raphaelitism: A Chronology
- The Complex Nature of Early Pre-Raphaelitism: Five Strands
- The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and Symbolic Realism
- Ruskin, Tintoretto, and the Language of Types
- New chemistry, new colors — scientific discovery and Pre-Raphaelite painting
- Pre-Raphaelite Women Artists
- Aesthetic Pre-Raphaelitism
- The Jovial Campaign. The Decoration of the Oxford Union Debating Hall
- Art in Evolution: The Association of Burne-Jones, Morris, and Rossetti in the Second Generation of Pre-Raphaelitism
- The Redgrave Brothers on the Pre-Raphaelites — a somewhat askew account of 1890
- The Pre-Raphaelite Body
- Existe-t-il un style Preraphaelite?
- Looking at the Pre-Raphaelites through the eyes of a Pioneering Art Historian

Artists and Literary Relations

- The Exhibition of Modern British Art in America, 1857-1858
- The Hogarth Club
- The First Pre-Raphaelite Group Expedition (1857)
- Partial List of Works Exhibited in the American Exhibition
- Pre-Raphaelites, Associates, and Later Followers — Sitemap
- Review by Simon Cooke of 'The Rossetti: Radical Romantics': an Exhibition at Tate Britain, London, 6 April–24 September 2023
- Pre-Raphaelitism — Literary relations: Sources, Influences, Confluences — Sitemap
- Review by Pamela Gerrish Nunn of Sophie Lynford's *Painting Dissent: Art, Ethics, and the American Pre-Raphaelites*
- Robert Browning as the Inspiration for Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites
- Sketching Clubs Associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Circle —The Folio Club & the Cyclographic Society

<https://victorianweb.org/painting/prb/index.html>
(part one)

Pre-Raphaelitism in the Other Arts

- The Pre-Raphaelites, Design, and the Decorative Arts — Sitemap
- Pre-Raphaelitism in Victorian Sculpture (I)
- What is Pre-Raphaelite Sculpture? (II)

General Cultural Contexts

- Victorian Political History — Sitemap
- Victorian Social History — Sitemap

Themes, Concerns, Reception

- Pre-Raphaelites — Theme and Subject — Sitemap
- Religious Themes and Contexts — Sitemap
- Gender Matters — Sitemap
- *The Art-Journal*, 1850-1880: Antiquarians, the Medieval Revival, and The Reception of Pre-Raphaelitism

Bibliography, exhibitions, book and exhibition reviews, discussion topics and related Web Resources

- Reviews of books about the Pre-Raphaelites and exhibitions of their works
- Twentieth- and twenty-first-century exhibitions of Pre-Raphaelite work
- Bibliography
- The Pre-Raphaelite Society — regularly updated programmes of events
- Leading Questions
- Symbolism
- Related Web Resources — Sitemap

THE VICTORIAN
WEB LINKING
SCHOLARSHIP,
TEACHING, &
LEARNING
SINCE 1994

<https://victorianweb.org/painting/prb/index.html> / (part two)

