

## “Fruits of Forced Desire: A Marxist Reading of Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market’”

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### Abstract

Christina Rossetti’s 1859 poem, “Goblin Market,” is a tale of two maidens fearful of goblin merchants who canter about the glen selling an array of tempting fruits. Outside traditional feminist interpretations, the poem demonstrates the Marxist theory concerning commodification and reification. The maidens reveal the process in which human beings become commodities, solidifying Marx’s statement that: “the increasing value of the world of things proceed in direct proportion the devaluation of the world of men.” Using specific aesthetic features common in the works of art during the Pre-Raphaelite movement, the poem further underscores the overall effects of laborer alienation and industrial aggression towards the working class, the negative dominance of capital and commodity fetishism through the supremacy of industrialization, the abundance (as detailed by the multiple fruits Rossetti describes) of available mass-produced goods, and the consumerist desire for such commodities. Furthermore, a comprehensive examination of Rossetti’s application of rhythm and meter will demonstrate how the power of desire is manipulated and controlled by the goblin men to dehumanize the maidens, forcing them to assume the character of exchange-value, and ultimately selling their bodies for material desire. The multiplicity of viewpoints that Marxist theory presents in “Goblin Market” exposes the ills of class inequality, commodity persuasion, and the conformity of the mass population to the bourgeoisie, resulting in the dehumanization of the proletariat. This presentation is a stylistic analysis of Rossetti’s poem to demonstrate how alienated the working class was in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, by applying a Marxist analysis of the poem, conclusions will be drawn to further discuss how desire of commodity effects current affairs.

**Keywords: Marxism, Commodity-Fetishism, Class Oppression**

### 1. Introduction

Christina Rossetti’s 1862 poem, “Goblin Market,”<sup>1</sup> is a romantic, imaginative tale of two maidens fearful of goblin merchants who canter about the glen selling an array of tempting fruits. Outside traditional feminist interpretations that focus primarily on gender inequality and patriarchal abuse, Rossetti’s poem calls for a closer look utilizing Karl Marx’s theory of commodification and reification in an all-inclusive manner, where each character contributes to a broader issue beyond that of an oppressed minority. The maidens reveal the process in which *human beings* become commodified, solidifying Marx’s statement in his book, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*: “The demand for men necessarily governs the production of men... The worker’s existence is thus brought under the same condition as the existence of every other commodity. The worker has become the commodity.”<sup>2</sup>

Using aesthetic features common in the works of art during the Pre-Raphaelite movement, the poem further underscores the overall negative effects of labor alienation and industrial aggression towards the working class. The twenty-eight fruits detailed by Rossetti in her opening lines of “Goblin Market” demonstrates the desire for industrial commodity and how this desire is manipulated and used by the goblin merchants to dehumanize the maidens, forcing them to assume the character of exchange-value, and ultimately selling their bodies for this material desire. The perspectives that Marxist theory provides in “Goblin Market” exposes the ills of class inequality, commodity

persuasion, and conformity of the mass population to the bourgeoisie (as represented by the goblin men), resulting in this dehumanization of the proletariat, and, most importantly, the slow destruction of moral and use-value that human beings utilize for survivability and communal efficiency.

## 2. The Poem, the Fruits, and the Pre-Raphaelite Element

Published in 1862 by London and Cambridge, Macmillan and Co. in a collection titled, *Goblin Market and Other Poems by Christina Rossetti*, the poem is constructed as a fable of how two maidens, Lizzie and Laura, encounter the goblin men selling an array of fruits. Rossetti lists these fruits in crafty meter; for example, a six-syllable waltz: “Crab-apples, dewberries, / Pine-apples, blackberries.” This meter resembles that of the repetitive machine of the factory – the waltz of industrialization. Even more so, the different types of fruit listed, from apples to lemons, all sorts of berries, ‘pine-apples’, and figs, would be hard-pressed to grow and harvest at the same time without the help of artificial climate simulation and advanced (at the time) agricultural technology. The pineapple, for example, originated as export from tropical areas, and due to the time it takes for trade to arrive from its destination by ship, this fruit would only be available for the upper-class society. In Rossetti’s poem, the two maidens are the lower working and cottager class, waking every morning “When the first cock crow’d his warning,” and “Fetch’d in honey, milk’d the cows, / Air’d and set to rights the house, / Kneaded cakes of whitest wheat, / Cakes for dainty mouths to eat.” These lines suggest an agrarian lifestyle away from the confinement of the London industrial complex. Laura and Lizzie would not have access or money to purchase such goods, as shown in Laura’s encounter with the goblin men when she says: “Good folk, I have no coin; / To take were to purloin, / I have no copper in my purse, / I have no silver either.”

Rossetti’s description of fruits and the romanticized narrative shows signs of the Pre-Raphaelites. Dinah Roe suggests that this 19<sup>th</sup> century movement advocated the “devoid of the political edge... [and] incorporated elements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century realism in its attention to detail and in its close observation of the natural world.”<sup>3</sup> Most artists of this movement focused on close attention to detail, utilizing medieval landscapes of religious tones, piety, and innocence. Yet, the natural world of London in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century was one of machines, industry, suffering workers, and rich landowners – the world observed was one greatly influenced by an increasing capitalist system. “Goblin Market” presents an attention to desire, and, albeit unconsciously, this desire originates from the social influences of material and production from reality outside the narrative, not the inner desire of sexuality or lust. This desire (from the goblin men) is capital at the expense of the human being. The flesh sought is not for sexual satisfaction, nor for a concern of sexual identity, but for discounted labor and the final stripping away of *all* identity that defines human beings like Laura and Lizzie in Rossetti’s poem; thus, as Marx makes clear in his observations: “everything is bought with labor and that capital is nothing but accumulated labor; ... the worker, far from being able to buy everything, must sell himself and his human identity.”<sup>4</sup>

## 3. Marx and Capital, Labor, and the Loss of Human Identity

London in the early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century experienced rapid growth in technological advancements, mainly focused in the textile industry. Unfortunately, due to this rise of productivity from such advancements, the working class suffered most at the hands of the bourgeoisie and landowners. While some workers benefited by moving from artisan (handweavers, potters, and blacksmiths, for example) income to sustainable labor in factories, an invisible barrier began to fester between classes, resulting in the abuse, both physically and mentally, towards the majority working class. To realize this in numbers and historical research, Robert C. Allen, in his book, *The Industrial Revolution*, provides a glimpse of the working conditions, social lifestyle, and the loss of identity that workers faced that illuminates the intense emotional verses that Rossetti provides in “Goblin Market.”

Consumption of commodity ultimately led to the great divide of the working class to the rest of urban population. This working class, totaling roughly two and a half million compared to the four hundred thousand bourgeoisie and landowners<sup>5</sup>, were forced to produce goods to satisfy the consumption needs of the wealthy, which in turn created what economist Joseph Schumpeter terms as “the Creative Destruction”: “the important competition that capitalism unleashes is not between similar firms in the same industry producing the same product, but rather from the introduction of radically new processes and modes of production.”<sup>6</sup> However adequate this may seem in modern times, in London in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the advancements made to produce more textile goods resulted in the fierce competition of one bourgeoisie against another. Another approach to the reasoning behind this great divide is Allen’s idea that

British government, consisting of Parliament populated by the aristocracy who had investment in the industrial machine, supports the notion that workers are caught in the “undemocratic politics that was responsible for the rising inequality of the Industrial Revolution.”<sup>7</sup> Laura and Lizzie both have very little money, if none at all, and make their sustenance by hand, much akin to the artisans and cottagers who represented an ever-decreasing class in Britain. The average worker, caught in such competition of wage labor, exchange value, and commodity-fetishism created by the bourgeoisie, slowly declined in human dignity and identity (which will be shown further down in Laura’s loss of her own identity to the consumption of overwhelming commodities). In order to imagine better technology to advance profit, the capitalist needs *capital* at the ready, and it must be cheap and expendable to gain the most profit. This means of production is the worker him or herself.

Karl Marx defines *capital* as “stored-up labor.”<sup>8</sup> Monetary profit is but an end statement of true capital: in order for wealth to be generated, a product must be sold; for the product to be sold it must be made; for it to be made, it must have a mode and means of production. In 19<sup>th</sup> century London, the primary mode of production was the worker who toiled in factories with harsh working conditions for very little wages. The stored labor refers to the excess of stored means of production such as land, material, and factory buildings, including the capitalist’s ability to have the cheapest labor possible. The result is competition of one capitalist against another, vying for the most profit at the least expense. By requiring currency in order to buy produced commodities that maintain survivability in the household, laborers are reduced to settle for work at very cheap wages due to the competition created by the capitalists. The only individuals obtaining any positive result from this system is the bourgeoisie, as represented in Rossetti’s poem with goblin merchants. Marx makes note of this system in his manuscript: “While the division of labor raises the productive power of labor and increases the wealth and refinement of society, it impoverishes the worker and reduces him to a machine.”<sup>9</sup> By becoming a machine that produces commodity for consumption, the worker *becomes the means of production* – the physical, non-human parts used in the production of goods. The human being is now the commodity consumed for the process of creating even more commodities.

#### 4. “Goblin Market” as an Example of Reification and Inequality

“Goblin Market” is a suitable example of this *reification* of the human being. For Marx, reification is seen as the metamorphosis of the human being into a means of production – a thing.<sup>10</sup> The two maidens, Laura and Lizzie, have opposing opinions on the value and trustworthiness of the goblin men. Laura initially warns of the goblin men’s immoral intentions: “We must not look at goblin men, / We must not buy their fruits: / Who knows upon what soil they fed / Their hungry thirsty roots?” Her sister, Lizzie, is also aware of the greedy roots of the bourgeoisie; the competition between them that creates the class division and horrific conditions the worker must endure. Laura, however, cannot contain her desire for consumption of these exotic fruits the goblin men present, exclaiming: “Look, Lizzie. Look, Lizzie. / Down the glen tramp little men.” Lizzie instead turns to flee after warning Laura that: “Their offers should not charm us, / Their evil gifts would harm us.” Laura waits in rapture of what fruits may fill her “hungry thirsty roots.” The goblin men, always crying “Come buy, come buy” like hawkers in the market, see Laura’s weakness, and “Leering at each other... / Signaling each other,” they begin their descent upon the working class that Laura represents. However, instead of taking money as a merchant would do, they seek what is most valuable – the physical body of Laura. Concerning currency, Laura’s lament that “I have no copper in my purse, / I have no silver either” does not hinder the goblin men, and solidifies Marx’s statement, in his opus *Capital*: “Capital is the means of production as transformed into capital, these being no more capital in themselves than gold or silver are money. It is the means of production.”<sup>11</sup> Laura is this capital, the needed means of production. The reification of the human being is the most advantageous capital to produce the most product for the cheapest price of labor. The goblin men seek the worker in order to gain the better profit: “You have much gold upon your head, / They answer’d all together: / Buy from us with a golden curl.” Laura cuts a part of her hair, buying commodity with her own body as the worker does with her body in the factories in order to acquire what little currency the bourgeoisie give her to buy the commodities for survival.

This repetition of the industrial system is the web that enslaves the worker, as Marx states: “what the worker gets is the smallest and utterly indispensable part of the product – as much, only as is necessary, for his existence, not as a man but as a worker, and for the propagation, not of humanity but of the slave-class of workers.”<sup>12</sup> By selling a lock of her golden hair, Laura has now symbolically sold herself to the industrial system. She has succumbed to the desire for commodity, *but* because she cannot ‘afford’ the excess the following night, she begins the decline of her humanity:

“Laura turn’d cold as stone  
 To find her sister heard that cry alone,  
 That goblin cry,  
 ‘Come buy our fruits, come buy.’  
 Must she then buy no more such dainty fruit?  
 ...  
 Her tree of life droop’d from the root:  
 She said not one word in her heart’s sore ache;  
 But peering thro’ the dimness, nought discerning,  
 Trudg’d home, her pitcher dripping all the way”

Laura’s humanity and identity has begun to rot from the roots, felling her tree of life, and her pitcher of water (a literary and social symbol for life and healing) drips slowly away as she becomes the commodity for the goblin men’s gain. As Laura waits in vain for the goblin’s return:

“She dwindled, as the fair full moon doth turn  
 To swift decay and burn  
 Her fire away...  
 She no more swept the house.  
 Tended the fowls or cows,  
 Feth’d honey, kneaded the cakes,  
 But sat down listless.”

Laura has ultimately paid the heaviest price for the desire for commodity – she has lost her utility and identity that a human being requires most. It is this example of the effects of reification and the desire for commodity that Laura demonstrates.

## 5. Resistance to Capitalism: Lizzie’s Martyr-ism and Laura’s Awakening

Lizzie, however, does not submit to the goblin men’s fruits of desire. Her attitude from the beginning has been of fear and critical awareness of the goblin’s intentions, but upon finding her sister enslaved to the industrial complex, she will not idly stand by: “Then Lizzie weigh’d no more / Better and worse; / But put a silver penny in her purse... / At twilight, halted at the brook: / And for the first time in her life / Began to listen and look.” The goblin men capitalize on her vulnerability, attempting to entrap her; yet, Lizzie, being mindful of the wisdom objectively acquired concerning this industrial machine, especially witnessing her sister caught in this deadly system of suffering, first attempts to purchase the commodities from the goblin men with her silver penny. The goblin men insist that Lizzie not just buy the commodities, but consume the fruits with them and join the company of the majority of workers that the bourgeoisie utilize as capital for profit: “‘Nay, take a seat with us, / Honour and eat with us,’ / They answer’d grinning.” Lizzie defies them: “‘If you will not sell me any / Of your fruits though much and many, / Give me back my silver penny / I toss’d you for a fee.’” The goblin men become violently furious. Since a capitalist system relies on the worker’s production of the commodity at the cheapest of wages *and* relies even more so on the worker’s *commodity-fetishism* to activate the repetitive process of purchase and production, Lizzie’s defiance to participate *in* the system threatens the stability of capitalism. This concept of commodity-fetishism derives from Marx’s *Capital*:

“...the products of labor become commodities, sensuous things... There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into a relation both with each other and with the human race... I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities”<sup>13</sup>

Lizzie’s intentions to buy the commodities was to in some way help her sister, Laura, in her material-plight, but not to buy the commodities for herself. Because of this, the goblin men attempt to force desire upon her through all means possible. At first she is sexually abused and harried as the goblin men attempt to seduce her: “Hugged her and kissed her. / Squeezed and caressed her.” She refuses and is thus violently beaten. Her body and spirit being beaten by the goblin men solidify the goblin men’s need for her *body* as capital, but because they are unable to claim her body as

property, they attempt to destroy it – a nod towards the destructive nature of capitalism by way of violent competition and economic greed. Laura stands defiant to the temptations and the state apparatus: “Like a royal virgin town / Topp’d with gilded dome and spire / Close beleaguer’d by a fleet / Mad to tug her standard down.” The standard of the working class flies unabated by Lizzie’s determination to secure her identity as a human being and take hold of the means of production without metamorphosing herself to become the means that the goblin men so dearly *want* her to be.

The key to Lizzie’s ultimate success in the war of attrition with the goblin men is her resistance to the ideology of capitalism and consumption. Lizzie does not falter in her belief of a system of bartering and communal sharing. In fact, Lizzie’s sole purpose in purchasing commodities is for the benefit of another, not for herself. By standing up to a system of abuse against the human body generated by the ideological system apparatus (the governance of this capital system of economy) and the repressive state apparatus (the policing of human beings to conform to the ideology), Lizzie stands in resistance, a martyr for the human being, as can be articulately seen in the way the goblin men treat her:

“One may lead a horse to water,  
Twenty cannot make him drink.  
Though the goblins cuffed and caught her,  
Coaxed and fought her,  
Bullied and besought her,  
Scratched her, pinched her black as ink,  
Kicked and knocked her,  
Mauled and mocked her,  
Lizzie uttered not a word”

By continuously resisting the urge to conform and become the means of production for the capitalists, Lizzie’s defiance pays off: “At last the evil people / Worn out by her resistance / ... vanished in the distance.”

Rossetti offers an ethical dilemma in how a class of people abused by a system of governance may break away from such influence. Much akin to addictions and habits, a slow recovery and weaning-off is necessary to hinder violent action against such intervention, much like how a complete abstinence from an addiction causes the body and mind to withdrawal, sometimes severely. A class of peoples used to oppression may violently react once the chains of repressed identity of consumption and commodity-fetishism are broken, which may lead to revolts, looting, and extreme judiciary measures against the oppressors. Lizzie trudges back home to Laura and lets her lick the juices on her face the goblin men attempted to force into her body, allowing Laura to slowly regain strength by weaning herself from the habits of consumption. Laura’s existence and identity is challenged by this new way of life, and the internal suffering caused by the capitalist system is seen: “Like a lightning-stricken mast, / Like a wind-uprooted tree / Spun about, / ... she fell at last; / Pleasure past and anguish past, / Is it death or is it life?” The death of the industrial system of oppression symbolizes the “death within” Laura’s created *artificial* identity by the bourgeoisie, and the “life” is her *real* identity as a human being, equal amongst all other human beings, and released from the cave of capitalism (similar to Plato’s cave allegory where the chained Being emerges from the dark cave of falsity and into the light of truth).

Although Lizzie, and eventually Laura, escape the chains of the industrial system responsible for dehumanization, much is still to be learned and done to eradicate the violence and degradation of the human being. This revolutionary poem is a defense of the precious identity of the human body and mind. Written during the peak of a strongly forged and violent system of industrialization, “Goblin Market” should be read as an ethical tale of what we as a global community should take into consideration concerning class systems and economic-driven ideologies.

## 6. References

1. The edition of Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” used for this essay is sourced from *Christina Rossetti: Poems and Prose* (Oxford World Classics, 2008), 105-119; all quotes from “Goblin Market” are derived from this source.
2. Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, translated by Martin Milligan (Prometheus Books, 1981), 20.
3. See “The Pre-Raphaelites” by Dinah Roe, 2014.
4. Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, translated by Martin Milligan (Prometheus Books, 1988), 25.
5. Allen, Robert C. *The Industrial Revolution: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 62.

6. Ibid., 81.
7. Ibid., 79
8. Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, translated by Martin Milligan (Prometheus Books, 1988), 36.
9. Ibid., 26.
10. See Karl Marx's *Capital Volume III*. "Chapter 48: The Trinity Formula", Penguin Classics, 1981, and *Grundrisse*, Notebook VI, "The Chapter on Capital" (Penguin Classics, 1973).
11. Marx, Karl. *Capital Volume III*, translated by David Fernbach (Penguin Classics, 1981), 954.
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