

Sensuous Imagery and Moral Danger in *Goblin Market* by Christina Rossetti

Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* is renowned for its lush, sensuous imagery that appeals powerfully to the senses while simultaneously warning against moral danger. One of the poem's most striking features is the way Rossetti entwines sensual pleasure with ethical peril, creating a narrative in which taste, sight, sound, and touch become vehicles of temptation. Far from being decorative, the poem's sensuousness performs a crucial moral function: it draws readers into the same alluring world that ensnares Laura, making the danger of temptation immediate and experiential. Through vivid imagery of fruit, sound, and physical contact, Rossetti exposes how unchecked desire can lead to spiritual and physical decay, while also revealing the possibility of redemption through restraint and self-sacrifice.

From the opening lines, the goblins' cry establishes a seductive atmosphere. Their repeated call—"Come buy, come buy"—is musical, rhythmic, and hypnotic. The language mimics the techniques of advertising and street vendors, appealing not to reason but to appetite. The goblins' fruit is described in a catalogue of abundance:

"Apples and quinces,
Lemons and oranges,
Plump unpecked cherries,
Melons and raspberries."

The sheer excess of this list overwhelms the senses. The fruits are "plump," "bloom-down-cheeked," and "sweet to tongue and sound to eye," appealing simultaneously to sight, touch, taste, and even sound. Rossetti deliberately blurs sensory boundaries, suggesting that desire itself becomes overpowering and disorienting. Moral danger in *Goblin Market* does not arise from abstract evil but from overstimulation of the senses, which dulls judgment.

Laura's response to this imagery demonstrates how sensuous pleasure leads to moral vulnerability. Although she initially remembers the fate of Jeanie—who tasted the fruit and died—Laura is unable to resist the allure:

"She listened and looked;
She bowed her head to hear."

The physical posture of "bowing" implies submission. Laura's fall is gradual, marked by curiosity rather than rebellion. When she finally consumes the fruit, the act is described in intensely sensual terms:

"She sucked and sucked and sucked the more

Fruits which that unknown orchard bore.”

The repetition of “sucked” emphasises excess and loss of control. The pleasure is immediate and overwhelming, yet it carries an undertone of danger. The fruit is “unknown,” suggesting that desire often masks its consequences. Rossetti does not deny the pleasure of the act; instead, she insists on its moral cost.

After the initial indulgence, the sensuous imagery shifts from abundance to absence. Laura can no longer hear the goblins’ cry, yet she yearns for it obsessively:

“Her tree of life drooped from the root.”

The biblical resonance of the “tree of life” underscores the moral implications of her sensory indulgence. Pleasure has resulted not in fulfilment but in depletion. The senses that were once overstimulated are now starved, and Laura’s physical decline mirrors her moral and spiritual deterioration. Rossetti thus portrays moral danger as a process: sensuous excess leads first to addiction, then to emptiness.

In contrast, Lizzie’s encounter with the goblins presents a different relationship between sensuous imagery and morality. When Lizzie goes to the goblin market, she is subjected to physical assault:

“They trod and hustled her,
Elbowed and jostled her,
Clawed with their nails.”

The imagery here is tactile and violent, transforming sensual contact into coercion. Unlike Laura, Lizzie refuses to open her mouth or taste the fruit. Her resistance redefines the body not as a site of indulgence but as a site of moral strength. The goblins smear juice on her face, saturating her with sensory temptation, yet she remains inwardly uncontaminated:

“White and golden Lizzie stood,
Like a lily in a flood.”

The simile suggests purity under assault. Sensuous imagery, which earlier signified temptation, now highlights moral endurance. Lizzie’s body absorbs the violence of desire without internalising it.

The climactic scene of redemption brings sensuous imagery and moral meaning into complex alignment. Lizzie invites Laura to taste the juices from her body:

“Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
Squeezed from goblin fruits for you.”

The language is unmistakably sensual, even erotic, yet its moral significance is radically different from Laura's earlier indulgence. This act is mediated by love and sacrifice rather than selfish desire. The same fruit that caused Laura's fall becomes, through Lizzie's self-denial, a means of salvation. Rossetti suggests that sensuous experience is not inherently evil; it becomes dangerous only when detached from moral responsibility and human connection.

Laura's reaction is violent and painful:

"She gnashed her teeth for anguish

And wrung her hands in pain."

The purgative suffering underscores the cost of redemption. Sensuous pleasure cannot be undone without struggle. Yet this suffering leads to renewal:

"Her breath was sweet as May,

And light danced in her eyes."

The return of sensory sweetness signals moral restoration. Taste and sight, once corrupted, are reclaimed in harmony with ethical balance.

In the concluding section, the poem reframes sensuous imagery within domestic and communal life. The danger of isolated pleasure is replaced by shared memory and moral instruction. Laura's final lesson to her children reinforces the poem's ethical core:

"For there is no friend like a sister

In calm or stormy weather."

Here, moral safety lies not in denial of the senses but in relational restraint and solidarity. Sensuous imagery, once a source of danger, becomes harmless when embedded in love, care, and social responsibility.

In conclusion, *Goblin Market* uses sensuous imagery not to glorify indulgence but to dramatise its risks. Rossetti deliberately immerses readers in a world of lush sensory appeal to reveal how desire can overpower moral judgment. At the same time, she complicates any simplistic rejection of pleasure by showing that the senses can also participate in redemption when guided by self-sacrifice and love. The poem's enduring power lies in this tension: it acknowledges the beauty and intensity of sensual experience while insisting on the necessity of moral vigilance. Through its rich imagery, *Goblin Market* warns that pleasure without restraint is perilous—but pleasure redeemed through love can become a source of healing rather than harm.