

Narrative Technique and Fairy-Tale Elements in *Goblin Market*

Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* is one of the most distinctive narrative poems of the Victorian period, notable for its fusion of innovative narrative technique with the conventions of the fairy tale. At once simple and complex, the poem tells a seemingly straightforward story of two sisters tempted by goblin merchants, yet its narrative voice, structural patterns, and stylistic devices give it a depth that transcends children's literature. Rossetti deliberately adopts fairy-tale elements—such as magical creatures, temptation, danger, and moral resolution—while employing sophisticated narrative strategies including repetition, shifts in pace, sensory excess, and an omniscient yet intimate narrator. Together, these techniques enable the poem to function both as a captivating tale and a serious moral and symbolic exploration.

Omniscient and Participatory Narrator

One of the key narrative techniques in *Goblin Market* is Rossetti's use of a third-person omniscient narrator who simultaneously observes, comments, and guides interpretation. The narrator has full knowledge of events and outcomes, warning both characters and readers about danger. Early in the poem, the narrator explicitly cautions:

“We must not look at goblin men,
We must not buy their fruits.”

This direct address echoes the didactic voice of fairy tales, where narrators often intervene to instruct listeners. The inclusive “we” draws the reader—especially a child listener—into the moral framework of the story. Yet despite this guidance, the narrator does not prevent Laura's fall, allowing the narrative to unfold with emotional tension rather than simple moral enforcement.

At the same time, the narrator is emotionally close to the sisters, particularly Laura. Her suffering is described with sympathy rather than condemnation, which complicates the fairy-tale moral binary of good and evil. This blend of authority and empathy reflects Rossetti's nuanced narrative control.

Repetition and Oral Storytelling Tradition

Repetition is one of the poem's most striking stylistic features and a hallmark of fairy-tale narration. The goblins' cry—

“Come buy, come buy”

—recurs throughout the poem, functioning as a refrain that builds atmosphere and reinforces temptation. The repetition mimics oral storytelling, where repeated phrases aid memory and create suspense.

Similarly, the long lists of fruit rely on rhythmic repetition:

“Apples and quinces,
Lemons and oranges...”

Such catalogues slow down the narrative while intensifying sensory appeal, drawing readers into the goblin market just as Laura is drawn. The technique reflects the fairy-tale tendency to linger on magical objects, allowing them to acquire symbolic power.

Fairy-Tale Setting and Supernatural Elements

The poem’s setting is deliberately vague, another typical fairy-tale feature. The goblin market exists in a liminal space—neither fully natural nor fully supernatural—appearing at twilight and disappearing without trace. This ambiguity enhances the sense of enchantment and danger.

The goblins themselves are classic fairy-tale creatures: half-animal, grotesque, and deceptive. Rossetti describes them as having features of cats, rats, snails, and wombats, echoing folkloric monsters that defy clear classification. Their hybrid nature reflects moral ambiguity and reinforces their role as tempters.

Additionally, the motif of forbidden fruit draws on fairy-tale and mythic traditions, from Biblical narratives to stories like Snow White. Eating becomes a narrative turning point, marking the transition from innocence to experience—a central concern of fairy tales.

Narrative Pacing and Structural Symmetry

Rossetti carefully controls narrative pace to reflect moral states. The early sections are lively and musical, matching the excitement of temptation. When Laura consumes the fruit, the narrative accelerates, mirroring her loss of restraint:

“She sucked and sucked and sucked the more.”

Following this, the pace slows dramatically as Laura declines, emphasising stagnation and decay. This shift heightens emotional impact and underscores the consequences of transgression.

The poem also exhibits structural symmetry, a fairy-tale convention. Laura’s fall is mirrored by Lizzie’s journey to the goblin market, but with a crucial difference: where Laura succumbs, Lizzie resists. This parallel structure reinforces the moral contrast between indulgence and self-control while maintaining narrative balance.

Lizzie as the Fairy-Tale Hero

In traditional fairy tales, redemption often comes through a heroic quest. Lizzie fulfils this role, though in a distinctly non-traditional manner. She does not defeat the goblins

through violence or magic but through endurance and moral firmness. Her encounter with the goblins includes physical assault:

“They trod and hustled her,
Elbowed and jostled her.”

Yet Lizzie remains steadfast, refusing to consume the fruit. Her heroism lies in passive resistance, a narrative innovation that aligns moral strength with restraint rather than conquest.

Lizzie’s return and her act of saving Laura complete the fairy-tale cycle of trial and restoration. The transformation scene—marked by suffering, collapse, and renewal—resembles the symbolic deaths and rebirths common in folklore.

Closure and Moral Framing

The conclusion of *Goblin Market* reinforces its fairy-tale identity through explicit moral framing. The adult Laura recounts the story to her children, turning lived experience into instructive narrative:

“For there is no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather.”

This framing device mirrors traditional fairy tales that end with a lesson meant to be passed on orally. At the same time, it highlights the narrative’s self-consciousness: the story we read is itself a moral tale preserved through storytelling.

Conclusion

Through its sophisticated narrative technique and rich fairy-tale elements, *Goblin Market* achieves a rare balance between simplicity and complexity. Rossetti employs an omniscient yet intimate narrator, rhythmic repetition, symbolic structure, and folkloric motifs to craft a poem that feels timeless and universal. The fairy-tale framework allows her to explore themes of temptation, danger, and redemption in an accessible form, while her narrative innovations deepen psychological and moral resonance. Ultimately, *Goblin Market* demonstrates how the fairy tale, far from being a simple genre, can serve as a powerful vehicle for profound moral and emotional truths.