Sisterhood and Female Solidarity in *Goblin Market* by Christina Rossetti

Christina Rossetti's Goblin Market is a richly layered narrative poem that resists narrow moral or allegorical readings. While the poem can be interpreted as a Christian allegory, a cautionary tale about temptation, or a critique of Victorian consumerism, its most radical and enduring strength lies in its portrayal of sisterhood and female solidarity. At a time when Victorian society often defined women through dependency on men—fathers, husbands, or lovers—Rossetti places female bonds at the centre of moral redemption and survival. The relationship between Laura and Lizzie is not merely familial affection but a powerful model of mutual care, resistance, sacrifice, and healing that challenges patriarchal norms.

From the opening of the poem, the sisters are introduced as inseparable companions whose lives are entwined in intimacy and routine. Rossetti writes:

"Golden head by golden head,

Like two pigeons in one nest

Folded in each other's wings."

This image establishes a world of female intimacy and mutual shelter. The simile of pigeons sharing a nest suggests safety, equality, and tenderness—qualities that stand in stark contrast to the aggressive, predatory behaviour of the goblin men. The poem thus constructs a symbolic opposition between female solidarity and male exploitation.

Laura's temptation and eventual fall begin when she listens to the goblins' seductive cry—"Come buy, come buy." Although Lizzie instinctively warns her sister, Laura succumbs to curiosity and desire. Her transgression is not presented as moral depravity but as human vulnerability. Importantly, Rossetti does not condemn Laura; instead, she shows how isolation from sisterhood leads to suffering. After tasting the goblin fruit, Laura becomes increasingly alienated:

"She no more swept the house,

Tended the fowls or cows,

Fetched honey, kneaded cakes of wheat."

Laura's decline is marked not only by physical wasting but by withdrawal from shared domestic and emotional labour. She can no longer hear the goblins' cry, yet she remains obsessed with its memory—an indication of how destructive desire becomes when it is severed from communal support. The poem suggests that female isolation, not desire itself, is the true danger.

Lizzie's role becomes crucial at this point. Unlike conventional Victorian heroines who depend on male saviours, Lizzie assumes the role of protector, redeemer, and moral agent. When she sees Laura fading, she does not moralise or abandon her. Instead, she acts. Rossetti describes Lizzie's resolve:

"Till Laura dwindling

Seemed knocking at Death's door:

Then Lizzie weighed no more

Better and worse."

This moment underscores the ethical foundation of sisterhood: Lizzie refuses to calculate risk or self-interest when her sister's life is at stake. Her decision to confront the goblins is an act of self-sacrificial love, grounded not in religious duty alone but in deep emotional commitment.

Lizzie's encounter with the goblin men is one of the most powerful scenes in the poem and a vivid metaphor for patriarchal violence. The goblins mock, assault, and attempt to force-feed her:

"They trod and hustled her,

Elbowed and jostled her,

Clawed with their nails."

Yet Lizzie resists by endurance rather than submission. She refuses to open her mouth or consume the fruit. Her resistance transforms her body into a site of moral strength. Unlike Laura, Lizzie does not consume desire; she carries it back in a purified form. Her body becomes a medium of healing rather than corruption.

When Lizzie returns home, the climactic moment of sisterhood unfolds. She urges Laura:

"Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices

Squeezed from goblin fruits for you."

This act reverses the original fall. Where Laura once consumed forbidden fruit in isolation, she now receives it through sisterly mediation. The language is intimate, even sensual, but it is stripped of exploitation and danger. Desire is redeemed within the safety of female solidarity. Laura's violent reaction—burning, writhing, and swooning—resembles a purgatorial cleansing rather than punishment. Eventually, she is restored:

"Her breath was sweet as May

And light danced in her eyes."

The poem's resolution reinforces Rossetti's belief in women as moral sustainers of one another. In the final stanza, Laura, now a wife and mother, retells the story to her children, emphasising its central lesson:

"For there is no friend like a sister

In calm or stormy weather."

This explicit moral places sisterhood above romantic love, social approval, or male protection. It is not husbands or fathers who save Laura, but Lizzie. Rossetti thus reimagines redemption as a female-centred process, rooted in empathy, courage, and mutual responsibility.

In the context of Victorian gender ideology, this vision is quietly subversive. Women were expected to be passive, morally fragile, and dependent. Goblin Market challenges these assumptions by presenting women as agents of salvation, capable of resisting exploitation and rescuing one another. The goblins represent a masculine economy of consumption and coercion, while the sisters embody an alternative ethic based on care and reciprocity.

In conclusion, Goblin Market is not merely a poem about temptation and moral fall but a profound celebration of sisterhood and female solidarity. Through the contrasting experiences of Laura and Lizzie, Rossetti demonstrates that survival in a hostile world depends on women standing together. The poem's enduring power lies in its assertion that female love is not secondary or sentimental but transformative and redemptive. By placing sisterhood at the heart of the narrative, Rossetti offers a radical vision of moral strength rooted in collective female experience—one that continues to resonate across time and culture.