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Christina Rossetti as an Individualist Woman Poet

A B S T R A C T

Christina Rossetti is a prominent English woman poet. She is one of the members of the pre- Raphaelites movement of art and poetry. Her poetry is known to be devotional, subtle and addresses children. However the paper aims at investigating the poet's uniqueness in poetry and how her poetry is different from Victorian and the pre- Raphaelites poetry. The paper also hypothesizes the potentially of the existence of feminist themes in Rossetti's poetry. To attain its objectives the paper analyses six poems and contextualizes these poems to gain an utmost understanding. The poems to be analyzed are: "Goblin Market", which is a long narrative poem and five other poems "Winter My Secret", "An Apple Gathering", "The Prince's Progress", "Repining", and "The Royal Princess". Feminism is the theory used to analyze the chosen texts. Throughout analysing the chosen poem the paper concludes that Christina Rossetti is a feminist. She was highly aware of the critical conditions of women at her time and she manifests that in her poems. Nevertheless she aim at subverting the patriarchal system via: suggesting the possibility of women economic and emotional independence, women's solidarity, and sharing experiences via story telling that create new feminist awareness.

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"كريستينا روزيتي الشاعرة المتفردة"

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الخلاصة:

كريستينا روسيتي شاعرة انكليزية معروفة وهي إحدى أعضاء حركة الشعراء ما قبل الرافائيلية. يعرف شعر روزيتي على انه شعر تعبدي ورقيق ويخاطب الاطفال. يهدف البحث الى استكشاف التفرد في شعر روزيتي وكيف يختلف عن شعر الشعراء ما قبل الرافائيليين والفكتوريين. كما يهدف البحث الى بحث موضوع النسوية في شعرها. يتم بحث ستة من قصائد الشاعرة ووضعها وفق نسقها الثقافي للحصول على النتائج المرجوة وللحصول على الفهم الافضل لهذه القصائد. القصائد المستهدفة هي: "سوق العفاريات" وهي قصيدة سردية طويلة وستة قصائد اخرى وهي: "الشتاء سري", "جمع النفاخ", "ارتقاء الاميرة", "النشكي", "الاميرة الرائعة". يتبع البحث النظرية النسوية لتحليل القصائد. من خلال تحليل النصوص المختارة يخلص البحث ان الشاعرة كانت واعية للظروف الحرجة التي تعيشها النساء في ذلك العصر وقد

وضحت ذلك في قصائدها. لم تكتف الشاعرة بذلك فمن خلال تحليل النصوص يتضح محاولات هدم النظام الأبوي. اقترحت الشاعرة وسائل عدة لتحرير المرأة مثل: الاستقلال الاقتصادي والعاطفي عن الرجل والتكافل بين النساء و قص القصص كوسيلة لتبادل الخبرات وخلق وعي نسوي جديد.

1- Introduction:

Christina Rossetti was born in London, England, in 1830 and died in 1894. Her father, Polidori Rossetti, is an Italian exile. She is the youngest child of the Rossetti's family which is consisted of Dante Gabriel, William Michael, and Maria. Dante was a poet and painter. William was a poet while Maria becomes a nun. Christina receives her education at home by her parents. She has had an impressive imagination that she composed her first story before she could learn to write. She was one of the prominent woman poets in the Victorian era. She published her first volume of poetry the *Goblin Market and Other Poems* in 1862 in the journal of the pre-Raphaelites brotherhood, *The Germ* (Bloom 13). Rossetti's first collection enclosed various forms of poetry "pure lyric, narrative fable, ballad, and the devotional verse to which she increasingly turned in her later years" (NAEL 1460).

Besides poetry, she writes prose works: *Commonplace and Other Stories*, 1870, *Speaking Likenesses* 1874, and non-fiction works such as *"Time Files: A Reading Diary* 1885; *Seek and Find: A Double series of Short Studies of the Benedicite* 1879 and *The Face of the Deep*, 1893". <http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/book/lookupname?key=Rossetti%2C%20Christina%20Georgina%2C%201830-1894>). Christina's main themes in poetry and other works are devotional, which are the reflection of her own believes and life experiences. Christina was a devoted Anglo- Catholic. She served in the church with her mother and sister. She broke her engagement to two men because they were not Anglo-Catholic and did not marry until her death.

This paper aims at investigating the poet's uniqueness in poetry and how her poetry is different from Victorian and the pre- Raphaelites poetry. The paper hypothesizes the potentially of the existence of feminist themes in Rossetti's poetry. To attain its objective the paper analyses six poems. One long poem, "Goblin Market", and five other poems "Winter My Secret", "An Apple Gathering", "The Prince's Progress", "Repining", and "The Royal Princess". Feminism is the theory used to analyze the chosen texts.

2- Rossetti the Poet

There are three main elements that constitute Rossetti, the poet. The first is her education, that she is influenced by the Italian poet Dante, John Keats, Walter Scott, Ann Radcliffe -a gothic novelist, Italian poetry, and her contemporary English women poets such Elizabeth Barret Browning (Zaturenska 136). The second is her being one of the pre-Raphaelites. Like them, her poetry is marked by aesthetic elements that her poetry is, in a way or another, a minute painting by words. She spends her earlier years of childhood in the countryside in Buckinghamshire that gives her affluent experience with nature which is reflected in her graphic description of nature in her poetry. Her poetry is also marked by the use of medieval tokens and fairy tales. Much of her poetry has been considered as children poetry until it was rediscovered for its potential meanings (Dombrowski 70). She has a "sensuous description in the manner of Keats, her aptitude in the pre-Raphaelite art of precise detail, and brooding melancholy that dimly forecasts James Thomson's *City of Dreadful Night* " (Stevenson 84).

The third element is the religious one. Her commitment to the service of Anglo-Catholic Church and love of God is very much reflected in her works. Virginia Woolf comments on Rossetti's strict adherence to religious causes in her literary works "that if she were to put God on trial, she would summon Christina Rossetti as a witness" (Roe 1). There is a reciprocal relationship between her devotion and her poetic imagination that it would be a mistake to draw a line to separate between the two phases of her poetry. That poetry has been slowly developed throughout fifty years: "Rossetti's poetic imagination was shaped by her faith, and her faith by her poetic imagination, in a symbiotic relationship that intensified over her half-century of writing" (Roe 1).

In her book *The Afterlife of Christina Rossetti*, Alison Chapman remarks that the primary source for Rossetti's poetry and prose is the Bible. Nevertheless, the leading figures of the Anglo- Catholic thinkers "Isaac Williams, John Henry Newman, John Keble" (Chapman 3) influenced her understanding of the Bible so that she choose what suited prose or poetry "as well as her interest in the suitability of each medium for serving God, man, woman, and writer" (Chapman 3). Rossetti's familiarity with the Bible is reflected in her poetry that is enriched with 'Biblical characters and voices' thus the reader should be acquainted with the bible to understand her poetry, Betty S. Flowers notes (Chapman 3). Virginia Woolf comments on Christina's individualistic mixture of the sensuous and religious: "Your poems are full of gold dust and "sweet geraniums"; ...your eye...observed with a sensual pre-Raphaelite intensity that must have surprised Christina the Anglo-Catholic. But No sooner...than your mind tells you that beauty is vain and beauty passes.

Death, oblivion, and rest lap round your songs with their dark wave" (NAEL 1505).

Rossetti writes poems of devotional themes such as *A Better Resurrection*, *The Three Enemies*; lyrical poems such as *Winter My Secret*, *A Birthday*, and *An Apple Gathering*. Among her best poems is *The 'Goblin Market* which was published in 1862. It is a long narrative poem of 568 lines. The poem was published as a poem for children, though the poet informs the publisher that the poem is not intended for children. It may be the vivid and glamorous description of nature, fruits, and goblins' story with the two sisters that associates the poem with fairy tales. Yet, any mature reader would easily identify the disturbing "allegory of temptation and redemption" (Stevenson 105).

Lona Mosk Packer, a biographer of Rossetti, remarks that she has written this poem when she was in a direct contact with prostitutes and single mothers as she was performing social services at the St. Mary Magdalen Home for Fallen Women on Highgate Hill from 1860 to 1870. Packer states that Dante Gabriel has asked his sister to omit "Cousin Kate": a poem from the collection in its later editions because of its striking subject that talks about a girl who has been seduced by a rich man who abandons her to marry a rich lady. Kate becomes a single mother and her child is presented as Kate's "triumph over her unfruitful rival" (Packer 153).

3- The Goblin Market

The poem tells the story of two maids: Laura and Lizzie. They used to go the forest every day and go back to their home before the sunset. The two sisters hear the goblins calling people to buy their goods. Their market includes various types of fruits. Lizzie warns her sister not to look at the goblins and not to buy their fruits. She questions the validity of their fruits "Who knows upon what soil they fed\ Their hungry thirsty roots?" Lizzie decides to go home while Laura is tempted by the beauties of the goblin fruits. She goes to them and asks for some fruits. Laura has no money to give them "Laura stared but did not stir\ Long'd but had no money". They ask her to give them a Lock of her hair. She gives them " a precious golden lock" and "tear more rare than pearl". She eats their fruits and goes home. Her sister Lizzie tells her that sometimes ago a girl called Jeanie has eaten from the goblin market's fruits and she withered and died and even flowers did not grow on her grave "I planted daisies there a year ago \ That never blow" which indicates the disgrace and bareness which stain the

maids who led astray. However Laura does not care and explains the magnificent taste of the fruits she has eaten. Next day, she goes with her sister to the forest and discovers that she no more can hear the Goblin's cry: "Come buy, come buy". Laura's health deteriorates. Her sister decides to save her and she takes a penny and goes to the Goblin Market to buy fruits from them as an antidote to save her sister. As she asks them for fruit the goblins become very happy but they go mad as she gives them money for their fruits. They attempt to force the fruits into her mouth, but they fail: "Would not open lip from lip" and does not make any motion. They squeeze the fruits all over her. At the end they become tired and go away. She goes home and calls her sister to suck the fruits on her face and neck. Lizzy takes care of her sick sister day after day until Laura becomes butter and her white hair turns golden again. After many years the two sisters have got married and have children. Laura tells her grandsons and daughters how she was saved by her sister.

The language of the poem is sensuous and graphic, typical of the pre-Raphaelites poetry. She, for instance, vividly describes the fruit: "Apples and quinces,\ Lemons and oranges, Plump unpeck'd cherries, Melons and raspberries". Rossetti affectively uses many types of rhyme and meter. "Her similes and metaphors nearly always delight the careful reader. For example, to see the goblin men: "Laura stretched her gleaming neck/ Like a rush-imbedded swan,/ Like a lily from the beck,/ Like a moonlit poplar branch,/ Like a vessel at the launch/ When its last restraint is gone." Moreover, throughout the poem the symbols are operated to reflect "larger meanings and relationships" (Redmond 2).

The main theme of the poem is temptation and redemption, while the title alludes to the trade of prostitution in the Victorian Era. The goblins symbolize men who seduce women using beautiful words and once the woman gratifies their needs they abandon her. They are in a form of goblins which indicates the potentiality of danger. The goblin is a " tiny mischievous or evil creature: an imaginary being resembling a small man of unpleasant appearance, usually evil or mischievous"¹. Throughout, unpleasant animal features are attributed to the goblins: "One had a cat's face,/ One whisk'd a tail,/ One tramp'd at a rat's pace,/ One crawl'd like a snail,/ One like a wombat prowl'd obtuse and furry,/ One like a ratel tumbled hurry skurry"

Dina Roe notes that this poem provokes many interpretations and criticism in the twentieth century: "Feminist, Marxist, Freudian, Queer Theory and New Historicist critiques which variously interpreted the poem as a warning

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/goblin>.

about the dangers of a free-market economy, a protest against hazardous practices in 19th-century food-adulteration, a Christian tale of sacrifice and salvation, a parable of lesbian empowerment, a fable about anorexia" (Roe 8).

Rossetti has had controversial points of view concerning women. From one side she denies women's right to vote or the right to be fully equal with men and from the other side she debates for women's right to be represented in the Parliament. She also condemned prostitution. According to Avery, " Her views may not always be 'radical' as such, but they are usually far from conservative and often questioning, challenging and potentially subversive (Avery 1).

The poem is obviously an allegory for women quandary in that era. The opportunities of lower class women are very limited. Either they work in factories in which they were severely exploited in working for long hours and earning less money than men do or they resort to prostitution. Women's exploitation in the market-place of prostitution is far more dangerous as it is presented in the poem. The way out of this problem is suggested by two things. The first is women economic independence and sisterhood. Lizzy consciously goes to the goblin market to save her sister. Her only weapon is a 'penny' which empowers her to defeat the goblins. Ironically the hero in this poem is not a man as it usually occurs in fairy tells. On the contrary men's presence in the poem is associated with fear seduction and annihilation. It is Lizzy who heroically rescues her sister. Lizzy's sacrifice alludes to Jesus' sacrifice for the salvation of sinners. Sisterhood and women solidarity is also an important theme in the poem (Redmond 3).

Moreover, Rossetti rewrites the traditional fairy tale because she changes the gender of the figure that usually recues the damsel. Instead of the prince charming or any other male figure, Rossetti introduces a female as a rescuer. She gives the female figure an agency that she gains economic independence and brings about valor actions (Williams 158). Unlike Laura in the Goblin market, the princess in Rossetti's narrative poem "The Prince's Progress" dies while she was waiting for the price to rescue her:

'Too late for love, too late for joy,
Too late, too late!
You loitered on the road too long,
You trifled at the gate:
The enchanted dove upon her branch
Died without a mate;
The enchanted princess in her tower
Slept, died, behind the grate;

Her heart was starving all this while
You made it wait.

4- Repining

In her poem "Repining" the man comes and united with the woman who was awaiting him. He introduces her to the world. Yet she could not gain happiness. To her, the world seems hellish and intimidating. At the end she prays for God to go back home:

She knelt down in her agony:
'O Lord, it is enough,' said she:
'My heart's prayer putteth me to shame;
Let me return to whence I came.
Thou for who love's sake didst reprove,
Forgive me for the sake of love.'

5- The Royal Princess

Like Lizzy in "The Goblin Market", the protagonist, in "The Royal Princess" has agency and could subvert the patriarchal system to rescue herself and her people. She is the daughter of tyrannical king whose people revolt against him. The lonely princess does not withdraw or run away or punish her people. In the introductory stanzas she looks unsatisfied with her passive role in life and the discrepancy between the lavish life style of the royalties and the life of her poor people. The protagonist chooses to present her father's wealth to the people though she is aware of the eminent danger of talking to the angry mobs.

I, if I perish, perish; they to-day shall eat and live;
I, if I perish, perish; that's the goal I half conceive:
Once to speak before the world, rend bare my heart and show
The lesson I have learned which is death, is life, to know.
I, if I perish, perish; in the name of God I go.

In the previous poems Rossetti condemns the portrait of the passive helpless woman and approves the portrait of active and revolutionary woman who has agency and speech for herself, widening as such "the potential roles available to women within Victorian culture "(Williams 158).

Moreover, in "The Goblin Market" Laura appears so grateful and proud of Lizzy. In a grateful tone, she describes her sister's heroic action to save her.

For there is no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather;
To cheer one on the tedious way,
To fetch one if one goes astray,
To lift one if one totters down,
To strengthen whilst one stands.

Thus, the poem suggests story telling as a feminine ritual that disseminates feminist awareness by passing experiences from one generation to the other. According to Karen Rowe storytelling is "semiotically a female art" (qtd. in Joosen 283).

6- An Apple Gathering

The fifth poem to be discussed is *An Apple Gathering*, a lyric in 28 lines. The speaker, in the poem, is an oblivious girl who passes by an experience that ends with her disillusionment and bewilderment. The poem is loaded with obvious metaphors that convey its meaning in sensuous yet richly religious metaphors. The poem tells the story of a young maid who has been thoughtless that she plucked the blossoms of her apple tree: "I plucked pink blossoms from mine apple tree" She enjoys wearing the blossoms on her head. In the harvest time all the girls gather their ripe beautiful apples except her because she had already plucked them. All the girls are accompanied by strong men who laugh with them and help to carry their baskets except the narrator who was mocked by other girls. She wonders " Ah Willie, Willie, was my love less worth \Than apples with their green leaves piled above?". The poem ends with the narrator stands still and does not know what to do as she realizes that she has been betrayed by her lover Willie. The narrator "has been sexually dishonored, although the reader knows this only through the metaphor of apple plucking" (Leder and Abbott 121). The society judges the narrator and casted her away. She became an outsider, "And hastened: but I loitered, while the dews \Fell fast I loitered still." The poem is an allegory for the girls who goes astray that at the end they are alone, and empty-handed. According to Bloom the poem, metaphorically, is a warning to the girls not to give up their virginity outside marriage institution "thus losing the chance of fruit (Bloom 48). The tone of the poem is sad.

7- Winter My Secret

The sixth poem is *Winter My Secret*. The poem is a lyric consists of 34 lines. It was written in 1857 and published in 1862. The speaker in the poem is most probably the poet herself. The pronoun "I" is used in the poem, then it is subjective poem. The title of the poems places the word winter at the beginning of a sentence giving the word winter, which may mean 'end', the function of a verb in an imperative sentence: (you winter my secret) or statement as if to say (I shall winter my secret). In both sentences, the reader senses the speaker's resistance to unfold her secret if there a secret at all: "Or, after all, perhaps there's none:\ Suppose there is no secret after all, But only just my fun". Avery remarks that the original title of the poem is 'Nonsense' which indicates the playfulness of the text. "With its bounding rhythms, skillful word play, and building up of image on image, the poem is teasing and mischievous as the speaker refuses to share a 'secret' that she knows" (Avery).

I tell my secret? No indeed, not I:
Perhaps someday, who knows?
But not today; it froze, and blows, and snows,
And you're too curious: fie!
You want to hear it? well:
Only, my secret's mine, and I won't tell.

The poem has a conversational tone. The listener is not known. She manipulates the listener telling him that she cannot tell him her secret, in winter because it is too cold in winter. The metaphor used in the poem is 'psychological': "The poem teases the reader with the promise of some kind of revelation that may or may not be forthcoming...As the poem progresses; winter clothing becomes a metaphor for the concealment of inner truth" (Mills 102). Yet the speaker continues in her resistance telling the speaker that even if spring and summer come she may not tell her secret because of the fluctuating nature of weather in each month. The speaker does not trust the listener for he may be inconsistent as much as seasons. However, the secret itself may be of a feminine subject that could be not told. "The suggestion that the withheld secret denotes the feminine subject is also implicit in the parodic self-reflexivity of 'Winter: My secret' (Chapman 72).

8- Conclusion:

Rossetti is one of the Pre-Raphaelites sharing their style of writing but employs it for the sake of her ends that appear far more than devotional. She is a

feminist for she demonstrates women's victimization and vulnerable position in society. In *Goblin Market*, she suggests economic independence, storytelling and women solidarity as means to protect women and gain independence. However Rossetti is not a radical feminist. Both of the sisters, in *Goblin Market*, have fulfilled their goals and looked safe through motherhood. The six poems discussed above have something in common. The image of man outside marriage institution, in the three poems, is threatening even if he is not present in the poem as in the poem *Winter My Secret*. Women's passivity is condemned and fatal in Rossetti's poems. Both of the women in "Repining" and "The Prince's Progress" are gloomy in distress because they are in a passive state. They are waiting for the hero to save them, but whether he comes or not the result is disastrous. The subversive undertone in "The Royal Princess" is more radical because the female protagonist does not like the politics of the patriarchy represented by the king and the father toward the people. Her repulsion of the politics of her father, the king, turns into action at the end.

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