



The Hidden Truth Behind Christina Rossetti's Goblin Market and Speaking Likenesses: The Poetess' Own Words as Key to Understanding her Troubled Mental Health

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Abstract— In 1845 Christina Rossetti's mental health deteriorated raising questions that caught scholars' attention for decades. This paper aims to pursue a preliminary analysis aiming at answering what may have been the cause behind the alleged sudden decline of the poetess's psychological and physical well-being. The most popular hypotheses are two: the first sees Rossetti suffering from a mental breakdown, and the second and most recent one states that the poetess may have been the victim of a sexual assault. The proposed research follows a qualitative approach by analysing two poems by Rossetti (*Goblin Market* and *Speaking Likenesses*) and contextualising her lines to recent studies on the poetess's life. A definitive answer as regards of what was the true reason behind Christina Rossetti's mental health troubles is yet to be found. However, both poems highlight the depressive state of Rossetti and how this may have been determined by a strong sense of guilt and distress suffered by the poetess. Rossetti highly criticised the strict mindset she was raised in her work. Her state could have been either determined by reaching puberty with the consequent changes in her body or as a consequence of sexual awareness and temptation.



Keywords— English Literature, Victorian Age, Christina Rossetti, Mental Health, *Goblin Market*, *Speaking Likenesses*.

I. INTRODUCTION

It was the year 1845 when the mental health of 15-year-old Christina Rossetti took a turn for the worse. Many questions concerning the cause behind her condition were raised during the following years. Thanks to Jan Marsh, her notorious biographer, we are now provided with plenty of information concerning Rossetti's early years. Born in a strongly religious middle-class family, during her childhood the poetess was known to be a very 'quick-tempered but very affectionate girl, full of whim and fancies' (Marsh 2012, ch.4) and the deterioration of her mental health came unexpectedly. A similar remark was made by one of her older brothers, William Rossetti, who remembered how she was 'vivacious and open to pleasurable impressions'. (ch.4).

During her youth Rossetti was more than conscious of what was expected from her as a daughter, woman and Christian at the time. This paper aims to pursue a preliminary analysis aiming at answering what may be the cause behind the alleged sudden deterioration of Christina Rossetti's psychological and physical well-being, serving as a starting point for further developments on the matter.

II. METHOD

The analysis will be pursued following a qualitative method. Information will be retrieved by analysing the lines of two of Rossetti's most famous poems: *Goblin Market* and *Speaking Likeness*. The two poems' analysis will be compared and contextualised with Jan Marsh's studies and information retrieved from

existing literature on the poetess's life and work. Particular emphasis will be given to data and lines regarding female characters, female condition, feelings of guilt, distress and temptation, the characters' social status, and Rossetti's life.

III. DISCUSSION

Among the hypotheses which were made, Marsh's one caught lots of attention, as she supposed that such a personality switch could have occurred due to a severe nervous breakdown. Further evidence of that is given by Dr Antony Harrison, who wrote how the psychological consequences suffered by Rossetti were many and easily attributed to a depressive state. She was particularly subjected to severe mood swings and frequent nightmares. Those symptoms weren't the only ones, it's known that:

psychological symptoms were accompanied by physical ones: shortness of breath, constriction of the chest and a feeling of suffocation, heart palpitations, and a cough [...] a stifling or fainting tendency from time to time, compelling her to desist from any occupation and lie down. (Harrison 2007, 417)

A second hypothesis gained popularity within the current decade. As she wrote in her blog in late December 2020, recalling her first Cristina Rossetti biography in the 90s, Jan Marsh stated how the writer's condition may also be the consequence of sexual abuse. The conclusion was made after she consulted professionals in teenage mental health; Marsh also claimed that the abuse may have occurred within the poet's family context, which seemed likely to have happened since at the time Rossetti was spending most of her time alone at home taking care of her ill father. (Marsh 2012) In the same post, she also corrected the first breakdown hypothesis by accounting for some notes written by one of the doctors who looked after Rossetti, Charles Hare, one of the most acclaimed doctors of Victorian London. Hare recalled the young girl's tendency on wanting to touch hot bars to burn her fingers and claimed that such an episode occurred more than once. Self-harm-related episodes were nothing new for Rossetti. It was William himself again who shared about a bad-cutting episode with scissors when she scored her arm (Marsh 2020). However, regarding the discovery of the hot bars' episodes, Marsh wrote as follows:

All these symptoms, but most especially the impulse to touch fire-hot bars, which allies with the 'cutting' incident recalled by her brother [...] record the kind of self-harm

often associated with severe teenage anguish - now termed an 'acute mental health crisis' rather than a nervous breakdown. (Marsh 2020)

Furthermore, the recent progress in modern medicine concerning mental health provides us with evidence of how similar symptoms and possible causes characterise both conditions (Becker n.d.). Despite it is now possible to assume the nature of Rossetti's condition, a secure answer confirming its causes is yet to be found.

Christina Rossetti's works contain plenty of violent and disturbing elements, for those aware of her troubled mental health, it is logical to wonder if those elements are somehow related to her psychological condition, and whether their analysis can provide us with plausible answers about what's behind it. Among Rossetti's works, two poems *Goblin Market* (1865) and the children's book *Speaking Likenesses* (1874) are remarkable ones containing highly explicit dark situations and words to analyse.

Goblin Market tells us the story of sisters Laura and Lizzie, both tempted by the evil Goblins of a market to buy and taste the so-called "fruit forbidden". Marsh defines the poem as a story of 'temptation, resistance and redemption' (Marsh 2012, ch.17), three elements providing us with a good starting point to analyse the text. Lizzie resists the temptation warning Laura that '[t]heir offers should not charm us; [t]heir evil gifts would harm us.' (Rossetti 1865, 4) Laura succumbs and consequently falls ill. She will be heroically saved by her sister who will taste the same fruit, making Laura regain her life and her old innocent laugh.

Concerning *Speaking Likenesses*, we are introduced to the stories of three little girls Flora, Edith and Maggie. In this case, three major elements must catch readers' attention: the social status of the girls, how they react to what occurs to them, and how they end up in those situations. Flora and Edith are from middle-class families like Christina Rossetti, while Maggie is from a working-class family. Within their stories, the girls will find themselves alone facing situations which can be scary, disturbing, or lead to uncomfortable feelings. Flora and Maggie deal with monstrous child-like creatures, proposing they play abusive games such as *Hunt the Pincushion*, whose goal is to take advantage of one's weakness; something different is what occurs to Edith, who will deal with the fact that she is unable to assist and help with the preparation of the party that her loving mother had planned as a treat for the whole family, this is cause of high frustration for Edith who will start questioning the role she has within this life. Contrarily to

the two middle-class girls who will face distress, Maggie's story ends with the little girl feeling safe thanks to her bravery. Despite being defined as a 'peculiarly revolting text for children' at the time of its publication (Marsh 2012, ch.31), probably due to the plenty of violent content, it's the work which provides us with numerous interesting elements to analyse to discover what Rossetti wanted to share with her readers.

Despite being born in a social condition which could be considered privileged at the time, the writer's approach to womanhood was not lacking hardship while she had to deal with the girls' standards of the Victorian Age. The years that saw Rossetti's mental health deteriorate, coincided with the start of her puberty, which is strongly related to mood swings itself already. However, Puberty-related mood swings are not enough to explain such a damaged psychological state. Puberty for girls also means body changes, which along with women's sexuality were considered as taboos at the time. (Harrison 1991, 422) Issues such as breakdowns were 'not uncommon among Victorian girls, as they struggle to tailor their nature to fit the prescribed mould' (Marsh 2012, ch.5). It was sexuality which tended to be mostly repressed, especially among high-class families who must preserve a certain pure reputation, making it became something to fear for girls. The relevance of such an ideal increased if growing up in a family with a strong religious background like the Rossetti. Due to this reason, we recall another claim made by Doctor Charles Hare, who linked Rossetti's condition to

some religious mania, which further studies hypotheses that may have conducted her to a form of hysteria. Indeed, regarding the possible causes behind the hysteria, medicine states that 'chastity or enforced celibacy could give rise to hysterical symptoms [...] by the suppression of natural sexual instincts' (Harrison 1991, 423).

IV. RESULTS

As a consequence of what was previously mentioned, plenty are references regarding religion, sin and sexuality which can be found within *Goblin Market's* lines. The goblin's insistence on asking the girls to 'come buy' can be the metaphor of an actual sexual temptation which led Laura to fall sick due to the sin of experiencing such a thing that '[s]he never tasted such before' (Rossetti 1865, 8), here represented by the fruit forbidden. The goblin fruits also recall the apples of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil which God prohibited Adam and Eve from eating. A forbidden experience

Laura was tempted and succumbed to just like Eve, new to her it probably was such an impulse for the 15-year-old Christina Rossetti. This particular theme is not new to Rossetti, as Harrison again explains how:

[t]he fear and sublimation of female sexual desire and insistence upon the dangerous, if not fatal, effects of its indulgence emerge often- metaphorically, if not literally- in much of Rossetti's poetry [...] often trooped as an illness or represented as an addiction that produces malaise, disease, or death for narrators and characters in her poetry. (416)

Times before Laura, it was a girl named Jeanie who succumbed to the goblins' temptations, meeting her death. Laura would have met the same fate if it wasn't for Lizzie, who previously reminded Laura about the late Jeanie, to warn her of the risks that tasting such a fruit brings. These lines recall those that can be read in the book of Genesis when God warns Adam and Eve that: '[o]f the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.' (Gen 2:17 ESV) A good definition of the poem is given by Mary Wilson Carpenter, who suggests it to "be read as a cautionary tale for girls and young women wishing to lead a Christian life amidst the temptations of the "world" (Carpenter 1991, 424).

As years went by, and she started to be more aware of the context she was raised in, Rossetti's works began to show some reaction towards what she and many other women at that time went through, starting from the ideals they had been somehow forced to follow from their childhood. A perfect example can be seen within the lines of *Speaking Likenesses*, which explains the plenty of violence contained among its lines. Professor Anna Despotopoulou believes that a social aspect emerges from the book stories which "utilises fantasy temporary social issues faced by women in the same time, satirising the mixed and often contradictory concerning childhood - female childhood, in particular" (Despotopoulou 2010, 416).

During the 1860s, years before writing *Speaking Likenesses*, Rossetti started to volunteer at St. Mary Magdalene Home, a community for the so-called fallen women, or prostitutes. Women's sexuality during the Victorian age was strongly associated with prostitution (Carpenter 1991, 417), which Victorians referred to claiming that '[o]f all the maladies with humanity is afflicted, prostitution is, we believe, the worst [...] destroying the lives of a large proportion the adult male population' (Despotopoulou 2010, 421). What is crucial to analyse here, is the impact such a situation had on the

image and perception of the different social statuses of the time. A widespread belief that emerged following the proclamation of the Contagious Act of 1866, regarding the prostitution problem in England was the following:

While middle-class families could afford to keep their children throughout childhood, offering them financial and emotional stability, 'working-class families afford the luxury of extended dependence', leading children, and girls to find ways of earning their wages on their own. Faced with the posed by the flaunting of female sexuality through unashamed prostitution, [...] as the pathological result of unwanted 'independence', of the absence of authority figures to control the excesses of the 'independent' young girls' unpredictable bodies (423).

Thanks to her work with prostitutes, Rossetti probably realised how the reality was quite different, as they came from many other social statuses. She intended to bring awareness to how the middle-class family's educational system was not as safe as it wanted to be perceived. Here comes the important aspect of speaking likenesses, which somehow 'discloses a paradox in the Victorian mentality' (424). As the three stories show us, the working-class girl, Maggie, is the only one who seems ready to face the aggressive world outside the safety of her home. On the other side, the middle-class girls, Flora and Edith, will find themselves unprepared to face what life has reserved for young girls once they are left alone, as they prove to be unable to deal with what the family of their social status tried to protect and stay away from. Maggie can do everything Christina Rossetti could not in her life, and in the end can deal with the darkness surrounding her through the journey inside a dangerous wood. As Marsh suggested, Rossetti may have used the book to blame the environment she grew up in instead of herself for what she had to go through starting from her adolescence (Marsh 2012, ch.31).

V. CONCLUSION

A definitive answer as regards of what was the true reason behind Christina Rossetti's mental health troubles is yet to be found. However, the two works here examined can be helpful as leads: *Goblin Market* exposing her struggles and reasons more likely to be behind her depressive state, such as the fear of facing her sexuality; and *Speaking Likenesses*, which may be interpreted as a hint of how those struggles may have emerged due to the pressure felt due to the Victorian

middle-class social mindset in which she grew up. No element highlights that Rossetti might have suffered from a mental breakdown or that she was the victim of sexual assault. However, her lines indicate her state of distress and guilt. The poetess is highly critical of the social mindset she was raised in. Two preliminary hypotheses can be made regarding her condition that can serve as a starting point for future developments on her case. The first one is determined by Rossetti reaching puberty and her inability to deal with the rapid changes in her body. The second one is strictly connected to the first one and it indicates how the changes in her body could have led the young poetess to discover her sexuality (which she might have perceived as a sin) and be the cause of the strong severe sense of guilt she suffered as an adolescent and young adult. This could have either been determined by self-awareness or by external temptation as it was for Laura on the lines of *Goblin Market* that were previously analysed.

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