



ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ | RESEARCH ARTICLE

GOTHIC AND TRAUMA: THE AMBIGUITY OF SUFFERING IN CHRISTINA ROSETTI'S "GOBLIN MARKET"

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ABSTRACT

Any critical study dealing with Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" must also tackle the poem's ambiguity and the numerous interpretations it potentially offers. Rossetti argued that "Goblin Market" is a story for children and a cursory reading of the text affirms this suggestion. The poem is about Laura and Lizzie, two sisters who come across a group of "goblin men" in a glen who call the sisters to "come buy" the uncannily attractive selection of fruit they sell. While Laura is quickly enticed by their invitation, Lizzie resists the temptation and runs away. After eating them, Laura becomes fixated in the fruit, but can no longer find the goblin men and falls sick. In the end, Lizzie confronts the goblins and cures her sister. Despite Rossetti's claim, critics have read the poem as diversely as a Christian allegory; a cautionary tale against drug addiction; a proto-feminist celebration of female solidarity; an erotic narrative; a criticism of capitalism; and as a Gothic fairy-tale.

Among its various definitions, Gothic can also be identified as a narrative of trauma since central characters in Gothic typically experience some shocking incident that intensely distresses them and roots out their lives. Similarly, trauma manifests itself in the constant anticipation of danger, confusion of time and place, and psychological surrender to what is threatening the psyche, which are identifiable themes in "Goblin Market" as well. The ambiguous nature of the goblins; the emphasis on day and night cycles, and the obscure nature of Laura's suffering are only a few of the Gothic elements in "Goblin Market". In this respect, this paper explores various Gothic features in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market". By doing so, it aims to demonstrate the intricately connected relationship between the Gothic genre and trauma in the poem.

Key Words: Gothic, trauma, Christina Rossetti, Goblin Market

GOTİK VE TRAVMA: CHRISTINA ROSETTI'NİN "CİN PAZARI" ŞİİRİNDE ÇİLENİN MUĞLAKLIĞI

Öz

Christina Rossetti'nin "Cin Pazarı" şiirini ele alan çalışmalar, şiirdeki anlam belirsizlikleri ve şiirin sunduğu sayısız yorumla da ilgilenmelidir. Rossetti, "Cin Pazarı"nın bir çocuk hikâyesi olduğunu iddia etmiştir ve metnin üstünkörü bir şekilde okunması bu iddiayı doğrulamaktadır. Şiir, küçük bir vadide anlatıcının deyimleriyle bir grup "goblin adam" ile karşılaşan kız kardeşler Laura ve Lizzie hakkındadır. Laura goblinlerin bir tutam saç karşılığı meyve ikram etme davetine çabucak kanarken, Lizzie goblinlere direnir ve kaçır. Laura meyveleri bitirip eve gittikten sonra daha fazla meyve isteğiyle hastalanır. Sonunda Lizzie, goblinlerle yüzleşir ve kız kardeşini iyileştirir. Rossetti'nin bunun çocuklara yönelik bir hikaye olduğu iddiasına rağmen, eleştirmenler şiiri bir Hıristiyanlık alegorisi; uyuşturucu bağımlılığına karşı uyarıcı bir hikaye; proto feminist ve kadın dayanışmasını öven bir şiir; erotik bir anlatı; kapitalizm eleştirisi; ve Gotik bir peri masalı gibi bambaşka şekillerde yorumlamışlardır.

Gotik türü, yaygın bilinen tanımının yanı sıra bir travma anlatısı olarak da tanımlanabilir, çünkü Gotik eserlerde çoğu zaman ana karakterler kendilerini strese sokan ve hayatlarını kökten değiştiren şok edici olaylar yaşarlar. Benzer şekilde klinik anlamda travma da hastalarda sürekli bir tehlike beklentisi, zaman ve mekân karmaşası ve zihni rahatsız eden şeylere karşı psikolojik teslimiyet şeklinde kendini gösterir. Tüm bu klinik belirtiler "Cin Pazarı" şiirinin satırlarında kız kardeşlerin olaylara verdikleri tepkilerde de gözlemlenebilir. Goblinlerin muğlak doğası; şiirin gündüz ve gece döngüsü üzerine vurgusu ve Laura'nın çektiği çilenin belirsiz nedeni, "Cin Pazarı"ndaki Gotik unsurlardan yalnızca birkaçıdır. Bu bağlamda, bu makale Christina Rossetti'nin "Cin Pazarı" şiirindeki çeşitli Gotik özellikleri ele almakta ve bu sayede Gotik türü ve travma arasındaki yakın bağlantıyı sergilemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Gotik, travma, Christina Rossetti, Cin Pazarı

Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" has variously been interpreted by critics as a Christian allegory of temptation; as a cautionary tale against drug addiction; as a celebration of female solidarity; as an erotic narrative; and even as a critique of capitalism. Sean C. Grass humorously states in his article "Nature's Perilous Variety in Rossetti's 'Goblin Market'" that the possible critical interpretations of Christina Rossetti's 1862 poem "Goblin Market" are nearly as diverse as the goblin fruits depicted in her poem (Grass, 1996: 356). Similarly, Hahn claims in "The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature" that: "In recent times the poem has been variously interpreted as an expression of feminist politics, a Christian allegory, a critique of Victorian marriage, and of a burgeoning commercial culture; nevertheless, its fantastic imagery and fast-paced rhythm have also been enjoyed by children" (Hahn, 2015: 233). My paper deals with the various Gothic features in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" which are also intricately connected to the representation of suffering and trauma in the poem.

The exploration of the relationship between gothic literature and trauma is not new. Among its various definitions, Gothic can also be identified as a narrative of trauma since central characters in Gothic typically experience some shocking incident that intensely distresses them and roots out their lives. Similarly, trauma manifests itself in the constant anticipation of danger, confusion of time and place, and psychological surrender to what is threatening the psyche.

Several critics have noticed that gothic literature usually repeats certain scenes and imageries. Joseph Crawford has remarked on the similarity between the repetitive imageries in works of

Gothic fiction and the recurring fears of the trauma victims his “Recurring Nightmares and the Repetition Compulsion in Gothic Fictions” (Crawford, 2010).

Focusing on works like Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper”, and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Andrea Juranovszky in his “Trauma Reenactment in the Gothic Loop: A Study on Structures of Circularity in Gothic Fiction” points out the same recurrent aspects of Gothic literature. He uses the term “the gothic loop” for the use of such imageries and makes a connection between these literary tropes and what Freud calls “the repetition compulsion” (Juranovszky, 2014).

Maria Beville, on the other hand, focuses on what she calls the “unspeakable”, in other words, things which stem from a traumatic event and are unbearably difficult to put into words in her “Gothic Memory and the Contested Past: Framing Terror”. In this respect, she argues that the narrative present of the late eighteenth century Gothic romances are in fact, similarly haunted by the “repressed historical issues” of the past (Beville, 2014: 52).

“Goblin Market” is the story of Laura and Lizzie, two sisters, who happen to meet a group of goblins who sell fruit in the woods. Laura submits to the dubious and somewhat aggressive temptations of the goblin men to eat their fruits in exchange for a lock of her hair. After returning home and not being able to find the goblins again, Laura gets ill. To save her sister’s life, Lizzie meets the goblins for a second time and asks to buy more fruit from them. The goblins reject Lizzie’s money and ask her to stay and eat with them. When she stubbornly resists their advances, the goblins attack her and unsuccessfully try to force her to eat their fruit. When Lizzie returns home, Laura sucks the juices off her sister’s face and recovers. Finally, Laura and Lizzie are pictured years later as mothers at the end of the poem. Laura recites her children the story of their scary meeting with the goblin men, and the poem’s last lines contain a moral lesson: “There is no friend like a sister”.

Mostly viewed as fantasy or a fairy tale by critics, Rossetti’s poem can also be interpreted as a Gothic story because of the ambiguous nature of the goblins, the stark contrast between night and day cycles, the two sisters’ personalities, and the goblins’ shift in demeanor between friendly and evil. The rural setting of the poem, and the mysterious cause of Laura’s illness can also be interpreted as other Gothic elements in the poem. In this respect, this article discusses the representation of trauma from a thematic level, focusing on the immediate and psychological reactions of the sisters to the supposedly traumatic events.

Firstly, Rossetti’s use of time in the poem serves to highlight the two sisters’ traumas. In her *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth identifies trauma as: “a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind (Caruth, 1996: 3)”. Caruth further describes trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena (11)”. Therefore, even after the immediate and visible effects of traumatic events have passed, trauma may persist on individuals throughout their lives.

In her 1992 book *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman classifies symptoms of trauma into three groups: “hyper-arousal”, “intrusion”, and “constriction”. Herman explains “Hyper-arousal”

as the constant anticipation of danger. Although individuals may temporarily forget their troubles, on the subconscious level they are constantly alarmed (Herman, 1992: 35). The fact that Lizzie hastily abandons her sister to the goblins clearly demonstrates the irrational fear she experiences just by seeing them. Later, Lizzie physically witnesses their evil side when she refuses to eat their fruit and “No longer wagging, purring / But visibly demurring / Grunting and snarling” they assault her violently. The goblins who, in the beginning seem quite harmless to Laura, later show their evil nature to Lizzie.

According to Herman, “Intrusion” is the second stage in trauma and is the fixed imprint of the traumatic event. Herman identifies that intrusion “reflects the indelible imprint of the traumatic moment” (35), and elaborates that, “long after the danger has passed, traumatized people relive the traumatic event as though it were continually recurring in the present. They cannot resume the normal course of their lives, for the trauma repeatedly interrupts” (35). Laura’s frequent fits of distress, physical convulsions, and her depression are clear examples of “intrusion” in the poem. After her exchange with the goblin men, she no longer sweeps the house, takes care of the animals, collects honey or water, bakes bread, nor eats, which also suggests the interruption in her daily life.

Herman’s final category is called ‘constriction’. She equates this stage with the feeling of submission. At this stage, the subject of the traumatic events undergoes an acceptance of the stressful events. The conflict between confronting and resisting the trauma results in constriction. It is a “trauma coping mechanism”(35), which is used when there is no way to fight. She argues that abused or maltreated children especially use constriction to leave behind the realities. That is, it may be easier for them to blame themselves instead of admitting their defenselessness.

In my opinion, the ambiguity of certain aspects in the poem quite overlaps with the idea that Laura and Lizzie cannot identify the source of their trauma, and this is what makes reading “Goblin Market” as a trauma narrative possible. As I previously mentioned, critics like Herman agree that trauma manifests itself in an inability to make sense of and to accurately define the traumatic events. Other critics like Kathie J. Albright refers to narrative gaps as the victims try to articulate their stories. On the representation of traumatic experiences through language, Albright claims in her “Analyzing Trauma Narratives” that: “In all such instances of trauma, the narrative nature of daily life is breached. Trauma produces a rupture in the life storyline of its victims and, as a result, survivors find it difficult, if not impossible, to untangle the now snarled or clipped threads of stories so as to create a new overarching story that makes sense to them” (Albright, Duggan, Epstein, 2008: 400). Albright et al. further assert that: “Attempts to process a traumatic event fall short because parts of the trauma story are often missing or disconnected, leaving it difficult to put away. As the individual loses grasp of a coherent story, so, too, does the researcher or practitioner who tries to understand it” (400). The narrative blocks against voicing trauma are thus framed by critics as an inability to communicate the source and effects of trauma. “Goblin Market” is especially interesting in this case, because of the ambiguity of Laura’s suffering. I have already mentioned that there are so many possible readings of “Goblin Market”. However, none of these interpretations can fully stand on their own and explain all problems of the poem. For instance, ‘what does the uncanny appearance of Rossetti’s goblins imply?’, ‘why does no

vegetation grow around where Jeannie is buried?', 'after their initial encounter, why can Lizzie find the goblins, but Laura cannot?' and most importantly, 'what did Laura do wrong, and why does she suffer at all?'. These are only a few of the questions that are left unanswered no matter how one reads the poem.

A different aspect that I wish to focus on my interpretation of "Goblin Market" as a trauma narrative is the 'fallen women' theme, which is specifically visible in the sexually suggestive descriptions of goblin men's fruits, and Rossetti's apparently religious reference to "the forbidden fruit" motif. As Jan Marsh writes about Victorian women in the online article "Sex and Sexuality in the 19th Century" that:

As daughters, employees or servants, young women were subject to male authority; as prostitutes, they enjoyed economic and personal independence. The response was a sustained cultural campaign, in sermons, newspapers, literary and visual art, to intimidate, shame and eventually drive 'fallen women' from the streets by representing them as a depraved and dangerous element in society, doomed to disease and death. (Marsh)

Rossetti's personal experiences as a volunteer worker among former prostitutes at the Highgate House of Charity can be identified as one possible source for her familiarity with the traumas of such Victorian 'fallen women'. David Bentley writes: "Goblin Market did not arise merely from Christina Rossetti's well-documented concern with 'fallen women' and their reclamation but... was originally written as an 'exemplary tale made imaginative' to be read aloud by Rossetti to an audience of fallen women at the St. Mary Magdalene Home for Fallen Women at Highgate Hill" (qtd in Marsh). Therefore, it is now best one looks for references to Rossetti's observations of trauma victims in "Goblin Market".

Firstly, one notices that the gender of Laura and Lizzie's children at the end is not specified and thus the only two human characters in the poem are women. However, the goblins are exclusively "men" as Rossetti clearly states in lines 42, 49, 55, 88, 241, 274, 307, 474. Rossetti's goblins mysteriously disappear and can neither be seen nor heard by Laura after she finishes eating their fruit, which may, then, represent the predatory men who, in the past took advantage of young, naïve women at Highgate Hill, and then disappeared once they are sexually satisfied. Secondly, unbeknownst to Laura, and in a state of dramatic irony, the goblins are evidently dishonest. Since she is too poor to pay for the fruits, Laura is tricked into giving a lock of her "golden" hair as payment, a decision which she regrets deeply later. Similarly, it is clearly stated by Rossetti that Jeannie, a former friend of the girls, "fell sick and died, for joys brides hope to have". These bodily and intimate forms of service to the predatory goblin "men" suggest a loss of innocence on the part of women in the poem.

It is clear from their first introduction to the reader that the goblins are evil. Goblins are indeed known throughout European folklore to be evil, but as soon as the sisters see them, Lizzie is fearful, and she warns Laura that "Their offers should not charm us / Their evil gifts would harm us". It is interesting that although the goblins are clearly merchants, and are supposed to be selling the fruits, Lizzie quite curiously uses the word "gift" for them. Thus, we can claim that Lizzie senses beforehand, the deceptive nature of the goblins and that the fruit are only ruse. Therefore, goblins in the poem can be compared to the Gothic villains who utilize certain supernatural traits to charm

and attract their victims. Lizzie, however, does not fall for those tricks and immediately covers her ears and eyes and runs away to the safety of their home, leaving her sister behind. This shows how strong her fear of the goblins and their fruit is.

A different portrayal of trauma in the poem is in Laura's discomfort during her sleep. In "Trauma and Recovery", Judith Herman comments on how traumatic events disrupt individuals' ordinary activities and explains that: "Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life (33)". Kai Erikson similarly comments on the psychological condition of the traumatized individual as follows:

The classic symptoms of trauma range from feelings of restlessness and agitation at one end of the emotional scale to feelings of numbness and bleakness at the other. Traumatized people often scan the surrounding world anxiously for signs of danger, breaking into explosive rages and reacting with a start to ordinary sights and sounds... Above all, trauma involves a continual reliving of some wounding experience in daydreams and nightmares, flashbacks and hallucinations and in a compulsive seeking out of similar circumstances. (Erikson, 1976: 183-184)

In the poem, Laura "gnash(es) her teeth", "burns in thirst", and is in "exceeding pain" while sleeping. It is possible to say that these are the various physical manifestations of trauma. Laura, being traumatized by her encounter with the goblins, thus experiences the effects of the events again and again in her nightmares. What is more, the presence of nightmares actually suggests that an even a peaceful refuge in sleep is impossible for Laura.

Having discussed the thematic representation of trauma in Rossetti's "Goblin Market", I would now like to discuss some formal aspects of the poem where trauma is visible. In this respect, I wish to point out two stylistic devices: "silence", and "repetition". The use of silence is a convention by Rossetti in making a connection between trauma and language. Silence is visible in the poem through Laura and Lizzie's senses and sensory deprivation. In "Trauma and Recovery", Herman identifies opposite tendencies in trauma victims. According to her, "The conflict between the desire to deny the horrible events and the desire to utter them aloud is the central dialectic of trauma" (1). Thus, traumatized people do not tell. They have enormous difficulties in engaging in the narrative process. According to Herman's observations, traumatized people feel that the traumatic events they have lived do not fit easily into the existing core beliefs about themselves and the world. Due to the overpowering nature of the events, they are not understood at first. Therefore, the inability to understand and communicate the event, and silence remain central features of the trauma.

Senses and sensory deprivation play a large role throughout the poem. At the beginning of "Goblin Market", it is mentioned that the girls "Morning and evening / (...) heard the goblins cry: 'Come buy our orchard fruits'". The tempting description of the Goblins' fruit in the very first lines refer both to taste and sight. After seeing them, while Laura bows her head to 'hear' more of the cries of the goblins, Lizzie is so embarrassed that she 'touches' her cheeks to check if she has blushed. Lizzie's first warning to her sister is that they "must not 'look' at goblin men". Later, as she is running away from the goblins, abandoning her sister for her own safety, Lizzie covers both her 'ears and eyes'. After Laura returns home from her exchange with the goblins, she gets sick

and can no longer ‘hear’ the goblin men. In fact, it is quite interesting that that while Laura cannot see or hear the goblins anymore, Lizzie can still hear them: Rossetti writes:

Laura turn’d cold as stone
To find her sister heard that cry alone,
That goblin cry,
‘Come buy our fruits, come buy’
(...)
Gone deaf and blind,
Her tree of life droop’d from the root:
She said not one word in her heart’s sore ache;
But peering thro’ the dimness, nought discerning. (549)

It is also worth noting that “Goblin Market” had originally been titled “A Peep at the Goblins”. Erika Kaiser writes in her “A Study of Sensory Integration in the Treatment of Adaptation to Traumatic Stress” that “sensory input is organized in a manner that enables an individual to establish a sense of where the body is in time and space, to feel safe in one’s own body, and to accurately perceive the body’s relationship to the environment” (Kaiser, 2010: 701). Therefore, I believe that the focus on the senses and sensory deprivation in the poem can be associated with Lizzie’s effort to escape a possible traumatic experience, and Laura’s inability to adjust to the effects of her traumatic exchange with the goblins.

Furthermore, Rossetti’s decision to use alliteration in certain parts of “Goblin Market” can also be analyzed in the context of the relationship between trauma and silence. The various sounds repeated throughout the following scene, the part Lizzie confronts the goblins, are alliterative:

Though the goblins cuffed and caught her,
Coaxed and fought her,
Bullied and besought her,
Scratched her, pinched her black as ink,
Kicked and knocked her,
Mauled and mocked her,
Lizzie uttered not a word. (551)

Traditionally, alliteration serves as a memory aid for bards to remember lengthy literary works. Therefore, the fact that this part of the poem serves to highlight Lizzie’s resistance to the symbolic rape by the goblins can signal her effort to forget the traumatizing event. This, however, constitutes a direct contrast between silence (or forgetting) and memory (or remembering). Even though Lizzie tries to overcome this memory, the poet’s use of alliteration here may hint that her encounter with the goblins is an unforgettable event, even though she manages to escape them. Alternatively, one can look at Rossetti’s description of the goblin men’s fruit as Laura first sees

them. The fruits are what cause Laura's suffering. The use of phrases such as: "plump unpecked cherries" "figs to fill your mouth", citrons from the South" can also serve to highlight the enduring nature of the fruit image that is imprinted on Laura's mind.

Repetition functions as the final formal element in the poem that signifies the connection between trauma and language. In his "Recurring Nightmares and the Repetition Compulsion in Gothic Fiction", Joseph Crawford writes: "Gothic fiction in all its forms has always displayed a powerful tendency towards repetition. Repetition seems to be built into the form at every level: not only do Gothic works repeat each other, with remarkably similar scenes appearing in many different stories, but they also tend to repeat themselves, their plots enacting the same scenes repeatedly" (Crawford, 2010: 2) Similarly, Freud famously mentions in his "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" that during his consultations, patients with a history of trauma often repeated themselves, obsessing about particular words, or visiting certain events again and again (Freud, 1961: 30). Thus, trauma cannot be easily and directly narrated, as trauma symbolizes what is impossible to utter: things that cannot be consistently and coherently integrated into speech by the patients.

Similarly, Gothic fiction in general, and "Goblin Market" in particular, is characterized by circularity and repetition. With respect to narration of traumatic experiences, repetition can symbolize the haunting, repetitive nature of trauma, or represent a desire to return to something familiar by the traumatized characters. Thematically, repetition exists in "Goblin Market" in that the whole story is a recurrence of Jeanie's story. While no specific information is given about her, Jeanie is probably an acquaintance of the sisters and just like Laura and Lizzie, she met the goblins, ate their fruits, and got sick. Her story is exactly the same as Laura's, except that Jeanie dies in the end, and is buried in a grave around which no vegetation grows.

The most obvious examples of verbal repetition in the poem, on the other hand, are Lizzie's frequently repeated warning: "We must not look at goblin men", and the goblin men's persistent invitation: "Come buy". While Lizzie's insistence on not looking at the goblins symbolizes her fear of repeating Jeanie's mistake, the cries of the goblins to "come buy" the fruits represent an almost ritualistic call to eat the fruits, and thus to break the social norms. On the repetitive nature of rituals which is a common trope of Gothic fiction, Joseph Crawford writes: "The exorcism of a demon, the staking, burning, or beheading of a vampire, the use of magical rituals to defeat supernatural forces, these things work precisely because they have always worked, because this is how these things have always been done, rooted deep in an implied tradition of effective repetitions stretching back into the archaic past" (7) Thus, I believe that repetition simultaneously serves both to frighten and to reassure the characters in "Goblin Market".

"Goblin Market" could consequently be regarded as a poem which employs aspects of the Gothic genre with the purpose of subliminally tackling the depiction of suffering and trauma under the conventions of the Gothic. The relationship between the sisters and the goblins can therefore be understood as indicative of the victims' fear of the sexual destructiveness of the 'unknown', which is embodied by the goblins. Within this context, the poem can be interpreted as a series of traumatic memories in Laura and Lizzie's unconscious mind. Rossetti's tale may thus symbolize the loss of purity, even though the poem ends on a happier note with the sisters' growth and

maturation. We can thus argue that the sisters' growth into adulthood at the end of the poem as the girls' conquering of their trauma and suffering. This is demonstrated by the fact that the sisters marry and have children. One can see that when the poem concludes, it ends with a positive portrayal of sexuality.

The gothic narrative style of Rossetti's "Goblin Market" can be compared to the style of trauma-writing, since the central characters in the Gothic typically experience some shocking incident that intensely distresses them and roots out their lives. Similarly, trauma manifests itself in the constant anticipation of danger, confusion of time and place, and psychological surrender to what is threatening the psyche, which are identifiable themes in "Goblin Market" as well. Thus, Rossetti's "Goblin Market" can be read both as a Gothic story and as a trauma narrative. Laura and Lizzie are consequently depicted as victims of a trauma which has been suppressed by their consciousness in the poem. Their behavior in the poem mimics several symptoms that can be observed in persons who undergo a traumatic experience very closely.

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