

Goblin Market



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

Christina Georgina Rossetti was born into an artistic, well-educated Italian-English family. Her father was a political exile, poet, and translator, and her maternal uncle, John Polidori, was a writer and physician to the famous Romantic poet Lord Byron. Rossetti was educated at home by her mother, Frances, who was devoutly religious and influenced her daughter's lifelong devotion to the Anglican faith. Despite the family's literary connections, they were relatively poor. Like many young women in her position, Rossetti prepared to become a governess (one of the few "respectable" occupations for women at the time), but poor health prevented her from teaching. The Rossetti household was intensely creative and artistic. All three of her siblings were writers, and her brother, Dante Gabriel, helped found the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, one of the most influential artistic movements of the Victorian period. Although not an official member, Rossetti collaborated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, contributing poetry to their journal, *The Germ*, under the pen name Ellen Alleyn, and modelling for their paintings. Rossetti's early poetry—influenced by Romantic literature as well as her own ill health—focused on themes of love and death. As her family's financial situation worsened and her health deteriorated, Rossetti grew more devoutly religious. Choosing to remain single, she led a relatively restricted life devoted to poetry, religion, and companionship with her mother and aunts. Between 1859 and 1870, Rossetti volunteered with the Church Penitentiary Movement, which offered a home, religious instruction, and training to women who were formerly prostitutes. The experience influenced her thoughts about fallen women and may have influenced "Goblin Market," which she published in 1862. Rossetti was a prolific writer. She published several more collections of poetry, devotional works, and short stories, and contributed to magazines and charity publications. During her lifetime, Rossetti had an excellent literary reputation in both the U.S. and the UK, where she was considered as a possible candidate for Poet Laureate following Tennyson's death in 1892. Rossetti died in 1894, and today she is recognized as one of the finest poets of the nineteenth century.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

During the nineteenth century, there were strict societal expectations about women's behavior. These rules were particularly rigid when it came to expressions of sexuality. There was a distinct sexual double standard, and women

suffered much more serious consequences for their sexual actions than did men. In part, this was because many Victorians believed that women were morally superior to men, so a sexual "transgression" marked them out as bad and irredeemable. Women were expected to remain virgins until they married, be faithful throughout marriage, and avoid the appearance of being interested in sex. If a woman violated these norms, she might be regarded as "fallen" and lose her reputation (and perhaps even her home). Men's sexual behavior was not limited or policed in this way. The term "fallen" itself could encompass a variety of acts, from engaging in sex outside of marriage, to becoming a mistress, to prostitution. Husbands could divorce their wives for being unfaithful, and many works of art and literature from the nineteenth century represented the fallen woman as abandoned by her family, husband, and lover, contemplating suicide, or even as a corpse. In "Goblin Market," Rossetti radically revises these typical fates by allowing her fallen woman, Laura, to recover through the help and self-sacrifice of her sister, Lizzie.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"Goblin Market" was inspired by nursery rhymes, fairytales, and fables, as well as by the Bible. Rossetti was devoutly religious, and she intertwines her tale of enchanted fruit and sisterly sacrifice with Biblical imagery connected with the stories of Adam and Eve, the Last Supper, and the temptation of Christ. In addition to its fantastical and religious elements, "Goblin Market" is also deeply concerned with the position of women in nineteenth-century society, a theme Rossetti returned to again and again. Her poems "Cousin Kate" (1862), "Maude Clare" (1862), and "An Apple Gathering" (1862) are all thematically related to "Goblin Market" and show the evolution of Rossetti's ideas about gender, sexuality, and power. Rossetti's focus on women's roles and the sexual double standard that defined nineteenth-century society also connects "Goblin Market" with earlier works of literature including Coventry Patmore's 1854 poem "The Angel in the House," which created an idealized and highly influential model of domestic Victorian womanhood, as well as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1857), both of which challenged beliefs about women's roles in society. "Goblin Market" is also related to the substantial body of literature that considered the plight of fallen women, or women who have sex outside of marriage. However, unlike many Victorian authors who wrote about fallen women—from Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839) and *Bleak House* (1852-1853), to Thomas Hood's "The Bridge of Sighs" (1844), to Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853)—Rossetti allows her fallen woman to escape the typical fate of death or exile. Radically for the time, in "Goblin Market"

Rossetti insists that fallen woman can be rehabilitated. Rossetti's poem also famously influenced Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). It is among Rossetti's most popular poems, and it has been illustrated, adapted, and reinterpreted in a variety of ways—from children's literature, to comic books, to erotica—in the 160 years since it was composed.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Goblin Market
- **When Written:** 1859
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 1862
- **Literary Period:** Victorian
- **Genre:** Poetry, Fairytale
- **Setting:** An unidentified, rural, idyllic setting, possibly in England
- **Climax:** Lizzie sets out to buy fruit from the dangerous goblin men, hoping it might save
- **Antagonist:** The goblin men, who represent sexual temptation and seem to exist only to destroy young women
- **Point of View:** Third-person; though the narrator has access to Laura's and Lizzie's motivations and emotions, the narrator never shares the goblins' point of view.

EXTRA CREDIT

Different Markets. As one of Rossetti's most popular works, "Goblin Market" has been republished, repackaged, reworked, and marketed to different audiences. Two very different markets for this poem have been children's literature and erotica!

Sibling Collaboration. "Goblin Market" has been illustrated in a variety of ways, from Arthur Rackham's famous fairytale illustrations in 1933 to John Bolton's comic book adaptation of 1984. But Rossetti's first illustrator was her brother and collaborator, Dante Gabriel Rossetti.



PLOT SUMMARY

Each morning and evening young women hear the cry of the goblin men, who seductively describe the **fruits** they're selling and urge the young women to "come buy." One evening, sisters Laura and Lizzie hear the goblins' call while visiting a brook to draw water. They grow fearful and crouch down to hide themselves. Lizzie warns Laura not to look and covers her own eyes for protection, but the incurably curious Laura looks directly at the goblins. Laura describes the goblin men's odd movements and wonders where the luscious and unusual fruit

they're selling might have grown. Still, Lizzie is steadfast in her refusal to look and warns Laura once again that the goblin men mean to harm them. Lizzie then puts her fingers in her ears to block the sound of the goblins' cries and runs away, leaving Laura on her own.

Laura chooses to stay and watch the goblins. She notices that they share physical characteristics with animals, including doves, rats, wombats, and cats, and have kind, pleasant voices. Fascinated, she stretches her neck toward them. The goblins approach Laura and seem delighted to find her alone. Laura wants to buy their fruit but has no money to offer in exchange. The goblins take **a lock of Laura's hair** as payment instead, and she then begins ravenously eating the fruit.

After gorging herself, Laura gathers up a fruit pit and, in a state of bewilderment, returns home to find her sister waiting up for her. Lizzie scolds Laura for staying out so late and reminds her of the fate of Jeanie, a young woman who, like Laura, accepted fruit from the goblins. After eating the fruit, Jeanie was abandoned by the goblins, pined away, and died. Now, no flowers will grow on her grave. Laura tries to reassure her sister, promising to bring back fruit from the goblins for Lizzie to try. Laura describes the fruit as otherworldly and unbelievably delicious. The two sisters go to sleep enfolded in one another's arms.

The next evening, when Laura and Lizzie return to the brook to draw water, Laura tries to delay their departure so that she might meet the goblins again. But try as she might, she cannot hear their calls. This greatly distresses Laura, who fears that she will never again eat the goblin fruit that she craves. The sisters return home, but Laura's heart aches. They go to bed, and Laura gnashes her teeth and weeps as she grieves for the lost fruit.

Days pass, and Laura pines for the fruit. She listens in the hopes of once more hearing the goblins, but she never again hears their cry. In her despair, Laura's hair begins to turn gray and she ages prematurely. One day, she remembers the fruit pit she took back with her after first meeting the goblins. Although she plants it in a sunny spot and waters it with her tears, it never grows. Laura becomes listless, refusing to perform her household duties or to eat. The once-active Laura now spends her days sitting by the chimney nook.

Fearing that Laura will die, Lizzie resolves to find the goblins and purchase some fruit for her sister. Lizzie knows that she will be putting herself in danger, but she nevertheless puts a silver coin in her purse and goes to the brook at twilight. For the first time, she actively listens and looks for the goblins.

The goblins are delighted to find Lizzie looking for them. They hug, kiss, and caress her as they try to tempt her to eat their fruit. Lizzie tosses them a coin, but the goblins try to persuade her to stay and eat with them. She refuses, saying she must return home to her sister, and asks for her penny back if they

will not sell their fruit. At this, the goblins become furious and begin to attack Lizzie. They call her proud and uncivil, stamp on her feet, scratch her, pull her hair out, and try to squeeze the fruit against her mouth to make her eat it. Yet despite the viciousness of the goblins' attack, Lizzie refuses to give in. Finally, the goblins realize their efforts are futile and they toss back her penny before departing, leaving Lizzie alone with the fruit juices dripping down her face.

In a daze, Lizzie runs home. She calls out to her sister and tells her to drink the juice from her face. Laura is horrified at first, fearing that Lizzie has eaten the fruit herself. Yet as Laura begins to taste the now-bitter juice, she behaves as if she is possessed, leaping, singing, tearing her robe, wringing her hands, and beating her breast. She loses consciousness and falls down.

Lizzie keeps watch over Laura throughout the night, checking her pulse and breathing, giving her water, and fanning her to keep her cool. By the time Laura wakes at dawn, a transformation has taken place. Laura's youth is restored along with her senses, and she embraces her sister. Years later, when Laura and Lizzie are both wives and mothers, Laura warns their children about the predatory goblin men and their dangerous fruit. More importantly, she shares the story of how her sister braved the goblin men to save her.



CHARACTERS

Laura – A young woman who nearly dies after eating the goblin men's dangerous **fruit**, and whose emotional suffering, hunger, and physical deterioration provide the dramatic focus for much of the poem. Laura and her sister Lizzie look almost identical, sharing the same ivory skin and **golden hair**, and both are presented as innocent and loyal young women. However, they differ in one very important respect: whereas Lizzie is cautious, Laura is curious. It is Laura's curiosity that sets in motion the drama of the poem as the sisters are out gathering water from a brook: instead of following her sister's advice to avoid the goblin men, Laura makes the decision to stay behind and purchase their fruit with a lock of her hair. This moment represents a symbolic fall from grace, as Laura succumbs to temptation and devours the forbidden fruit. After returning home, Laura craves more; yet, no longer able to hear the call of the goblin men, she becomes listless, ill, and prematurely aged. She is brought to the verge of death, like Jeanie, and saved only by her sister's willingness to put herself in harm's way to obtain more fruit. Laura is intended to represent the typical "fallen woman" in Victorian society—that is, the woman who gives in to sexual temptation and has sex outside of marriage. Often, such characters in Victorian literature die or are exiled from their communities. But Laura is saved from this fate by the sacrifice of her sister. In fact, Laura not only recovers from her illness, but goes on to achieve the ideal ending for women in Victorian

literature: marriage and motherhood. Thus, although Laura sins—giving a part of herself away in exchange for forbidden fruit—she is still characterized as a pure and morally upright person. This allows the poem to suggest more broadly that fallen women are not irredeemable, and should be granted sympathy rather than shunned.

Lizzie – Lizzie is Laura's sister, whose steadfast sense of morality and devotion ultimately saves Laura from the goblin men's clutches. Initially Lizzie appears to be a less important character than Laura, whose curiosity brings about her symbolic "fall." However, Lizzie's character undergoes the most significant transformation in the story. At the poem's opening, Lizzie's defining characteristic is her caution, in contrast to Laura's curiosity. Lizzie is fearful of the goblin men and urges Laura not to look at them or to eat their **fruit**. In fact, Lizzie is so determined to avoid the goblin men, and the sexual danger they represent, that she abandons Laura to them, leaving her sister to fend for herself. Later, however, Lizzie becomes almost Christlike when she risks her own safety and chastity by confronting the goblin men for the sake of her sister. The goblin men pose an implied sexual threat, and Lizzie withstands their assault—which, though not explicitly sexual in nature, is a symbolic affront to her innocence and purity—in order to bring back fruit juice and pulp to save Laura. Lizzie, untainted by her encounter with the goblin men, and even seems to paraphrase Christ's words to his disciples by instructing Laura to "Eat me, drink me, love me." Lizzie, like Laura, also achieves the ideal outcome for women in Victorian literature, which is marriage and motherhood. Lizzie also notably shares many characteristics in common with an important mid-Victorian cultural figure: the "Angel in the House." This figure comes from Coventry Patmore's 1854 poem of the same name, and refers to a woman who is moral, chaste, innocent, and committed to securing her family's domestic comfort.

The Goblin Men – The goblin men are the mysterious villains of the poem. Where they come from is never specified, but each morning and evening they call out in order to tempt young women into purchasing and eating their **fruit**. The fruits they bring to sell are beautiful, sweet, juicy, and altogether otherworldly. Once eaten, however, the fruit causes women to experience an overpowering hunger and thirst that cannot be satisfied; they weaken and pine away, aging prematurely and sometimes—as in the case of Jeanie—they die. The goblins are hybrid creatures, who resemble both men and animals, and their voices also combine the gentle purring and cooing sounds of animals with the persuasive qualities of human speech. Indeed, the goblins are seductive figures, able to convince women to stay in the woods and eat with them by offering them presents and using flattering language. Laura and Lizzie even seem to experience arousal in the presence of the goblins, evidenced by their "tingling cheeks and finger tips" and Laura's intense curiosity about their hybrid bodies. Yet the goblins

seemingly exist only to harm women; they delight in tricking young women into eating their fruit and then abandoning them, causing great misery. Although they can be sly and persuasive, the goblins are also vicious and brutal: they savagely attack Lizzie in a way that resembles a sexual assault when she refuses to eat their fruit. The goblins are thus symbols of temptation and the dangerous sexual appetites of men, and their behavior reflects societal fears about how women become “fallen.” Many works of Victorian art and literature represented fallen women who were tempted, seduced, and then abandoned by their false lovers, and Rossetti transforms these predatory men into monsters who are not quite human.

Jeanie – A young woman who has died after eating the goblin men’s fruit before the story begins, and whose experience serves as a cautionary tale for Laura and Lizzie. Jeanie is a shadowy figure, mentioned only twice throughout the text and lacking any distinctive characteristics. Instead, she functions as a foil for Laura and Lizzie. Like Laura, Jeanie gave in to the temptation of the goblin men. She ate their fruit and accepted their gifts, and subsequently grew weak, listless, and prematurely old.



THEMES

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TEMPTATION AND FALLEN WOMEN

“Goblin Market” is a complex poetic allegory about sexual temptation. Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, at a time of strict societal expectations regarding women’s behavior, Christina Rossetti was intensely interested in the plight of fallen women—those women who, by society’s standards, were perceived to have given in to the temptation of engaging in sex outside of marriage and who were subsequently shunned. Rossetti’s fairytale-like poem focuses on two sisters, Laura and Lizzie, one of whom succumbs to sexual temptation with near-fatal consequences, while the other withstands temptation and saves her fallen sister. While it is tempting to read “Goblin Market” as a warning to women to avoid sexual temptation, Rossetti’s allegory also lends itself to more complex readings. In contrast to many other representations of fallen woman in nineteenth-century art and literature, Rossetti’s fallen woman, Laura, never loses her purity and is ultimately saved through the self-sacrificing love of her sister. Rossetti thus seems to argue, against the dominant view of her time, that fallenness is not a permanent state and that fallen women can be saved and reintegrated into their communities through the compassion and support of their

unfallen sisters.

Opening her poem with the goblin men’s seductive cry, Rossetti immediately establishes them as figures symbolic of sexual temptation. The goblins seem to exist solely in order to tempt young women to purchase their delicious but poisonous **fruits**, which they describe in terms that are unmistakably erotic: from “Plump unpecked cherries”—simultaneously suggestive of virginity and sexual ripeness—to voluptuous “Bloom-down-cheeked peaches” that invite the buyer to touch as well as taste. Their sales pitch is effective; when Laura and Lizzie hear it, they crouch close to the ground and hide themselves not just to avoid looking at the dangerous goblin men, but seemingly also to hide the evidence of their sexual arousal: their blushes and “tingling cheeks and finger tips.” The goblins are an object of curiosity and desire, and their exotic fruit functions as a metaphor for forbidden desires that cause young women to transgress the boundaries of acceptable feminine behavior at the time. While Lizzie runs away to prevent herself from looking at the goblin men or sampling their fruit, Laura finds the spectacle of their bodies—which resemble animals—irresistible. Although the goblins use gentle, seductive language to persuade the women, their potential for sexual violence is foreshadowed by their animalistic appearances, which hint at their wildness and unpredictability.

Laura suffers a kind of symbolic sexual fall that is set in motion when she disregards her sister’s warnings and looks at the goblin men, sensuously stretching forth “her gleaming neck” because her “last restraint is gone.” Although Laura is apprehensive about accepting the goblins’ fruits without paying, they persuade her to cut a lock of her **hair** and “Buy from” them “with a golden curl.” In nineteenth-century culture, locks of hair were considered to be precious and were exchanged between lovers, friends, and family members. Symbolically, the goblins commodify a part of Laura’s body—a part associated with love and intimacy—so when Laura cuts her hair in exchange for the fruit, she symbolically sells herself and becomes aligned with the fallen woman or prostitute. Her immediate regret is signaled by the fact that she “dropped a tear more rare than pearl,” however she sucks the fruit “until her lips [a]re sore,” with a violent intensity that is distinctly sexual. Here, Laura is not just aligned with fallen women but with the biblical Eve, the archetype of the fallen woman, who ate forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge and was expelled from the Garden of Eden. Like Eve, Laura similarly loses her innocence after eating the fruit; the desire to purchase more preoccupies her thoughts, and when she finds that the goblins have abandoned her, she pines away, ages prematurely, and refuses to eat. Following a pattern established by many works of art and literature about the fallen woman, the goblin men abandon Laura after seducing her, destroy her peace, and bring her to the verge of death.

Rossetti allows Laura to avoid the typical fates for fallen

women in nineteenth-century literature, however, which are death, exile, or transportation to the colonies. [In doing so, Rossetti seems to suggest that fallenness is only a temporary state rather than a stain that remains on a woman for the rest of her life and that complete rehabilitation and reintegration into her community remains possible. Laura's rehabilitation is made possible by her sister, Lizzie. Lizzie knowingly puts herself in danger by confronting the goblins at nightfall to buy more fruit for Laura; she understands that, like Laura, she might be tricked into eating their fruit herself. However, the goblins, finding that they cannot persuade Lizzie to eat, violently attack her. Not only do they scratch her arms and pull out her hair, but they try to force fruit into her mouth in a scene that resembles a sexual assault. Lizzie withstands their attack and refuses to eat. Triumphantly returning home to Laura, Lizzie](#) instructs her to lick the juices from her face with the sexually suggestive words: "Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices," "Eat me, drink me, love me." Despite their sexual undertones, Lizzie's words evoke Christ's instructions to his followers at the Last Supper to drink his blood and eat his body. Laura is revived by sucking the fruit juices from Lizzie's body, as if she has taken part in a sisterly version of holy communion. Lizzie, then, functions as a Christ-like figure, whose self-sacrifice and willingness to risk death enables her to purchase the redemption of her sister.

The poem concludes years later, with Laura explaining to her own and Lizzie's daughters the importance of sisters protecting and supporting one another, "For there is no friend like a sister." Rossetti thus argues that fallen women are not inherently tarnished or irredeemable, and can be reclaimed through the love and labor of other women.



WOMEN'S ROLE IN SOCIETY

In "Goblin Market," Rossetti reflects on the role of women in Victorian society. Victorian men had more freedom, education, opportunity, and leeway

to express themselves sexually, but women were expected to remain sexually innocent or face serious consequences. The poem critiques the unfairness of society's double standards, showing how they put women at a disadvantage, and then challenges them by allowing Laura to achieve a happy ending despite her transgression. However, both Lizzie and Laura's ultimate redemption involves a return to motherly duties and caring for the next generation of girls. Rossetti, then, ultimately upholds a distinctly gendered view of society in which women occupy and find fulfillment within very specific domestic roles.

Many Victorian commentators argued that women should remain innocent—or ignorant—about their own sexuality until they were married, and Rossetti seems to connect Laura's symbolic sexual fall to her innocence and incomprehension of the dangers posed by the goblin men. Lizzie understand the risks involved in associating with the goblins and eating their **fruit**, explaining to Laura that "Their offers should not charm us,

/ Their evil gifts would harm us." Later she also relates a cautionary tale about a young woman named Jeanie, who ate the goblins' fruit and then withered and died. While Lizzie's knowledge protects her from temptation, Laura is curious because she lacks knowledge and experience. Like the biblical Eve, who gave into temptation—eating the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge and suffering a fall from grace—Laura cannot control her curiosity or her appetite. She lingers in the glen and purchases the goblins' fruit with a lock of her **hair**—an action that aligns her with prostitutes and fallen women. Rossetti thus seems to suggest that prizing "innocence" and keeping women ignorant about their own sexuality leaves them vulnerable to sexually predatory men who would flatter, use, and then discard them—just as the goblins have done to Jeanie and will do to Laura.

Rossetti further seems to criticize the unfairness of society's double standards, which punished women much more severely than men for illicit sexual activity—that is, sexual activity that takes place outside of marriage. Each of the three named women in the poem—Laura, Lizzie, and Jeanie—suffers terribly due to the seduction and violence of the goblin men. Laura suffers psychologically, becoming distraught when she can no longer hear the goblins' call; she also becomes ill and prematurely ages. Lizzie is brutally assaulted by the goblins for refusing to eat their fruit. Jeanie, like Laura, withers and fades after eating the fruit before ultimately dying. The goblins, however, get away without reproach. If the goblins represent sexual temptation at the start of the poem when they seduce Laura, their threat to women becomes intensified as the poem progresses. Lizzie's confrontation with the brutal goblin men shows that they represent men's dangerous sexual appetites and, by extension, their capacity for sexual violence. Although Laura is saved and Lizzie survives her ordeal, the goblin men are never punished. Years later, they continue to pose a threat to the next generation of women—Laura and Lizzie's daughters. This seems like an acknowledgement, on Rossetti's part, of the rootedness of the sexual double standard in Victorian culture: if men go unpunished for seducing or assaulting women, women can only combat their threat by informing and watching out for one another.

Rossetti also quite radically, represents Laura and Lizzie, the fallen sister and the sexually pure sister, respectively, as nearly identical characters who achieve an identical outcome at the poem's conclusion: marriage and motherhood, which were considered to be the goal of Victorian women's lives. Rossetti stresses the similarities between Laura and Lizzie by giving them the same white skin and golden hair, and by describing them identically in language that emphasizes their purity even after Laura's "fall": they sleep "Golden head by golden head, / Like two pigeons in one nest / Folded in each other's wings," "Like two blossoms on one stem, / Like two flakes of new-fall'n snow." The difference between the sisters is not that Laura is

corrupt and Lizzie is pure; it is that Laura gives in to temptation. In maintaining Laura's purity, Rossetti implies that men's seduction is the most significant cause of fallenness among women and argues that sexual curiosity and activity do not make women impure or irredeemable.

However, despite rejecting the widespread belief that fallen women were "ruined" and could never be fully rehabilitated, Rossetti is still somewhat conventional in that she seems to present motherhood as an ideal state for women—evident in Lizzie's wistful remembrance of Jeanie, "Who should have been a bride." On the other hand, Rossetti intriguingly never mentions by name Laura's and Lizzie's husbands or the fathers of their (presumably all female) children. It is possible, then, to read the ending of "Goblin Market" as the creation of an ideal community comprised entirely of supportive women, which includes mothers, sisters, and daughters but perhaps not men. Although Rossetti critiqued the sexual double standard, in this poem she does not reject outright the belief that women were naturally suited to marriage and motherhood. Rather, as exemplified by Lizzie, Rossetti seems to suggest that women could become empowered through acts of nurturing.



SALVATION AND SACRIFICE

Lizzie saves her sister, Laura, through an act of self-sacrifice that occurs at the poem's dramatic climax. Believing Laura to be on the brink of death, Lizzie

seeks out the dangerous goblin men and, in doing so, places herself in extreme danger; she risks being tempted, as Laura and Jeanie were, to eat the forbidden **fruit**, and, although she does not know it when she sets out on this dangerous mission, she will also be physically—and, it is implied, sexually—assaulted by the goblin men. Rossetti uses biblical allusions to align Lizzie with Christ, whose sacrifice saves humanity from death, a radical decision given that Victorian society did not treat men and women as equals. Perhaps more radically still, Rossetti seems to suggest that the plight of fallen women might call out the nobler qualities—like bravery and self-sacrifice—in their unfallen sisters, calling them to become more like Christ.

Simply confronting the goblins alone, in the dark forest, is a significant sacrifice on Lizzie's part for the sake of her sister. For Lizzie, the goblins are a source of terror. Not only was she so frightened of them that she "thrust a dimpled finger/ In each ear, shut eyes and ran" away, leaving Laura to contend with them alone and setting in motion her fall at the start of the poem. She has also observed firsthand their dangerous effects on women, having buried Jeanie and witnessed Laura's suffering and decline after eating the fruit. The extreme fearfulness with which Lizzie initially regarded the goblins—coupled with her intense physical response to them, her veiled blushes and "tingling cheeks and finger tips"—indicates that she believes herself to be susceptible to their seductive sales pitch. By confronting the goblins, Lizzie

willingly puts herself in danger and risks becoming a fallen woman herself, an important symbolic reversal of her previous act of sisterly abandonment.

Lizzie's fears about the goblins are well-founded. When she arrives at the brook, they try to seduce her. Finding she will not give in to temptation, however, they begin to brutally assault Lizzie while also attempting to force their fruit into her mouth—an attempt to violate her body that might be read as a metaphorical rape. Lizzie, however, sacrifices her safety and subjects herself this attack because she is desperate to bring the goblins' fruit back home to revive Laura—even if she is only able to bring back the "juice that syrugged all her face,/ And lodged in dimples of her chin,/ And streaked her neck which quaked like curd." Unlike at the start of the poem, this time, Lizzie refuses to run away.

Determined to withstand the goblins' attack, Lizzie is described in a series of images that emphasize her strength and moral purity in the midst of turmoil and danger. She is compared to "a beacon left alone/ In a hoary roaring sea,/ Sending up a golden fire" and "a fruit-crowned orange-tree/ White with blossoms honey-sweet/ Sore beset by wasp and bee." More importantly for the religious elements of Rossetti's allegory, Lizzie is also described as "a royal virgin town/ Topped with gilded dome and spire/ Close beleaguered by a fleet/ Mad to tug her standard down." These lines seem to connect Lizzie with the Virgin Mary, who is often viewed as a second Eve. Through the birth of her son, Jesus, Mary was believed to have reversed the consequences of Eve's fall and saved mankind from sin and death. This connection foreshadows the way that Lizzie's sacrifice—in submitting to the goblins' attack—will reverse Laura's fall and secure her salvation.

Not only does Lizzie survive the goblins' attack and refuse to eat their fruit, and not only, like the Virgin Mary, does she manage to reverse Laura's fall. Through her act of self-sacrifice in undergoing this terrifying ordeal, Lizzie becomes thoroughly Christlike. When she returns home, she instructs Laura to lick and suck the goblins' fruit juice, which covers her face and body, in words that echo those of Christ at the Last Supper: "Eat me, drink me, love me;/ Laura, make much of me." In the Bible, Christ's sacrifice in allowing himself to be tried, tortured, and crucified allows him to purchase eternal life for his followers. In the same way, Lizzie's act of self-sacrifice secures the salvation of her sister, who recovers after sucking the fruit juices from Lizzie's battered body. Like Christ, who transformed water into wine, Lizzie's sacrifice transforms the once delicious goblin fruit—"Sweeter than honey from the rock"—into a bitter but life-restoring antidote.

Contrary to the dominant beliefs of her time, Rossetti seems to suggest that braving danger in order to help fallen women (who were often vilified by society) is what makes a woman Christlike, not maintaining sexual purity by avoiding danger altogether. Through Lizzie's act of self-sacrifice, Laura is saved

from Jeanie's fate, and Lizzie, herself, grows in strength and understanding. In overcoming her fear, Lizzie sets an example for the young women of the next generation—including Lizzie's and Laura's own daughters—of the way that women should care for one another, "For there is no friend like a sister."



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE GOBLIN MEN'S FRUIT

The goblin men's fruit is a complex symbol that represents different kinds of desire and temptation throughout the poem. For Laura specifically, the fruit represent a desire for things that are forbidden, exotic, and sensual. The goblins present the fruit to Laura on golden plates and describe it using sensuous language, emphasizing its taste, color, and juiciness. There is clearly a sexual dimension to Laura's desire for the fruit, especially evident in the descriptions of her eating it: she "sucked and sucked and sucked the more," and "sucked until her lips were sore." Laura also speculates, at first slightly fearfully but later eagerly, about the exotic place where the fruit must have grown, wondering, "Who knows upon what soil they fed / Their hungry thirsty roots?" This suggests that for Laura, the fruit is further representative of life beyond the confines of her role as a typical Victorian woman. To eat it, then, is to metaphorically transgress past the boundaries of women's acceptable behavior. In this way, the fruit also echoes the forbidden fruit in the biblical Garden of Eden: in the Bible, human beings fell from grace when Eve ate this fruit and introduced sin into the world. Laura's eating of the goblin men's fruit is a similar example of her giving into temptation, and her actions strip her of her innocence: Laura's desire for more fruit is so strong that without it, she pines away and begins to weaken and age.

Lizzie similarly recognizes the fruit as an object of desire, but she perceives its dangerous qualities and tries to warn her sister against eating it. Like Laura, Lizzie becomes physically aroused by the sound of the goblin fruit sellers. Yet, in contrast to her sister's overt curiosity, Lizzie is ashamed of her interest in the fruit. Like Eve, who attempts to hide herself from the sight of God after eating the forbidden fruit from the Garden of Eden, Lizzie crouches low to the ground and tries to "veil[...] her blushes." When Lizzie thrusts "a dimpled finger/ In each ear," shuts her eyes and runs away, she shows that she is not only afraid of the goblin men; she is also afraid of herself and the strength of her desire for things that are forbidden. Metaphorically speaking, Lizzie is afraid of sexual appetites that will place her beyond the pale for nineteenth-century women. When Lizzie finally confronts the goblin men, she still desires

the fruit—but importantly not for herself. She wants to purchase the fruit and bring it home to Laura in the hopes that it will work like an antidote and make her well again. In doing so, Lizzie becomes Christlike. Although acutely aware that goblin fruit brings death and misery to the women who eat it, robbing them of their peace of mind and opportunity to become wives and mothers, Lizzie risks her life and transgresses the rules to retrieve the fruit for her sister. Like Christ, who endured humiliation, torture, and death by crucifixion to save the souls of mankind, Lizzie willingly endures torture at the hands of the goblin men, who beat and abuse her when they realize that they cannot make her eat their fruit. There is also a sexual dimension to the attack Lizzie withstands, because their attempt to force fruit into her mouth might be viewed as a sexual assault or an attempt to violate and rape her. When Lizzie returns with the fruit juice dripping down her face, she instructs Laura to "suck my juices" and to "Eat me, drink me, love me," echoing the words of Christ at the last supper when he instructed his disciples to eat his body and drink his blood. Through Lizzie's act of sacrifice, the fruit is transformed from a symbol of forbidden and dangerous sexual desires to a symbol of sacrifice and sisterly love.



HAIR

In "Goblin Market," women's hair functions as a symbol of their purity and health—both spiritual and physical. At the start of the poem, Laura and Lizzie are both described as having golden hair, a desirable color during the nineteenth century and one that was often associated with youth, beauty, and purity in the literature of the time. Laura's hair, in particular, might also be read as an allusion to Petrarch's Laura, the beautiful, golden-haired, idealized woman immortalized as the love interest in the fourteenth-century poet's sonnets (Rossetti was thoroughly familiar with Petrarch, incorporating allusions to his poetry within her own). When Laura and Lizzie are described as like "two wands of ivory/ Tipped with gold for awful kings," their hair is associated with treasure, precious and pure enough to crown the scepter of a king. And earlier in the poem, Laura uses her golden hair as if it was literally gold or currency. At the goblins' suggestion, Laura clips "a precious golden lock," drops "a tear more rare than pearl," and uses it to pay for their forbidden fruit. Hair is literally an extension of Laura's self.

Within nineteenth-century culture, hair had great symbolic significance and value. Locks of hair were exchanged as tokens of love and kept as mementos of the dead. Hair also had material value, as many destitute women sold their hair to wigmakers. The act of giving away her precious hair in exchange for indulging in the sensual pleasures of the goblins' fruit thus aligns Laura with the figure of the fallen woman. The change from golden hair to gray, then, symbolizes the loss of Laura's youth and innocence after succumbing to temptation, selling a

part of herself, and eating the fruit. As Laura loses her childlike innocence, she begins to physically age and decline, and this change is reflected in the quality of her hair. Laura's hair only regains its golden color after she drinks the fruit juice that Lizzie brings back to her after a terrifying confrontation with the goblin men. Through Lizzie's Christlike act of self-sacrifice, the goblins' fruit is transformed from poisonous to restorative and life-giving. When Laura consumes it, it restores her youth and purity and the golden abundance of her hair.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *The Complete Poems* published in 2005.

Goblin Market Quotes

☞☞ Morning and evening
 Maids heard the goblins cry:
 "Come buy our orchard fruits,
 Come buy, come buy:
 [...]
 Plump unpecked cherries,
 Melons and raspberries,
 Bloom-down-cheeked peaches,
 Swart-headed mulberries,
 Wild free-born cranberries,
 [...]
 All ripe together
 In summer weather,—
 Morns that pass by,
 Fair eves that fly;
 Come buy, come buy:
 Our grapes fresh from the vine,
 Pomegranates full and fine,
 Dates and sharp bullaces,
 Rare pears and greengages,
 Damsons and bilberries,
 Taste them and try:
 Currants and gooseberries,
 Bright-fire-like barberries,
 Figs to fill your mouth,
 Citrons from the South,
 Sweet to tongue and sound to eye;
 Come buy, come buy."

Related Characters: The Goblin Men (speaker), Lizzie, Laura

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5-6

Explanation and Analysis

Each morning and evening, goblin fruit merchant men haunt the rural, fairytale-like setting of "Goblin Market," seductively calling out their wares and hoping to tempt young maidens who live in the vicinity to "come buy" their forbidden fruit. The sing-song quality of the goblins' cry mimics the cries of the real-life fruit sellers that Rossetti would have encountered in marketplaces throughout London. This tethers a poem with many magical or fantastic elements to the real world of the nineteenth century, encouraging readers to understand the poem as a complex allegory that comments on women's roles and the dangers they faced in nineteenth-century society. The goblins' fluid, rhyming words also playfully evoke nursery rhymes and children's songs and indeed, "Goblin Market" has historically enjoyed great popularity as a children's poem, although Rossetti did not write it for children. However, the poem's adoption of forms and characteristics associated with children's literature is deliberately juxtaposed with the erotic content of the goblins' cry. The goblins emphasize their fruit's wildness and exotic lusciousness, its vivid colors and rich flavors, and encourage nearby maidens to imagine how the fruit would feel in their mouths. Thus, in this opening stanza, Rossetti presents the goblins as deceptive: seemingly innocent but sexually dangerous to young women.

☞☞ Crouching close together
 In the cooling weather,
 With clasping arms and cautioning lips,
 With tingling cheeks and finger tips.
 "Lie close," Laura said,
 Pricking up her golden head:
 "We must not look at goblin men,
 We must not buy their fruits:
 Who knows upon what soil they fed
 Their hungry thirsty roots?"

Related Characters: Laura (speaker), The Goblin Men, Lizzie

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:



Page Number: 6


Explanation and Analysis

On hearing the cry of the goblin merchant men, Laura and Lizzie become alarmed, crouching low to the ground and clasping one another for protection. The sisters know that the goblins are dangerous and that they must not look at them or buy their fruit, but their reasons for hiding are somewhat ambiguous. While they clearly wish to avoid an encounter with the goblins and the temptation of being invited to purchase forbidden fruit, the sisters' "tingling cheeks and fingertips" and Laura's fascination with the goblins' bodies suggest that they are also curious and sexually aroused. The sisters not only hide themselves, but also attempt to hide the signs of their sexual arousal—their blushing cheeks and tingling bodies—from observation. Their attempt to hide might be an allusion to the biblical Adam and Eve who, after eating the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, hid themselves from God because they were ashamed of their nakedness. Yet unlike Adam and Eve, who hid after they had eaten the fruit and suffered a fall from grace, Laura and Lizzie hide themselves *before* Laura has eaten the fruit, which suggests that Rossetti might be making a comment on the way that women's sexual curiosity was considered transgressive in itself. This detail is another point of connection between the fairytale world of the poem and the social realities of nineteenth-century culture and its beliefs about women's sexuality.

●● 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.

Related Characters: The Goblin Men, Laura

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis



Fearful herself and realizing that she cannot persuade Laura to come home with her, Lizzie puts her fingers in her ears and runs away, abandoning Laura to the dangerous goblin men. With Lizzie gone, Laura is no longer restrained from

indulging in her intense curiosity about the goblins' luscious fruit and unusual, animalistic appearances. This stanza dramatizes the moment in which Laura transgresses the boundaries of acceptable behavior for women, defying her sister's warnings that maidens should not look at goblin men. However, at this moment, when Laura becomes aligned with the cultural figure of the fallen woman who gives in to sexual temptation, she is also described in ways that emphasize her purity, beauty, and femininity. Her gleaming neck is compared to a swan, a traditional symbol of fidelity in love, and references to the lily—a symbol of the Virgin Mary—and the moon—which is associated with Artemis, the virginal Greek goddess of the hunt—further connect Laura to feminine images of chastity, faithfulness, and purity. Through this imagery, Rossetti seems to emphasize Laura's purity even at the moment when her actions set in motion her metaphorical sexual fall.

●● But sweet-tooth Laura spoke in haste:
"Good folk, I have no coin;

To take were to purloin:
I have no copper in my purse,
I have no silver either,
And all my gold is on the furze
That shakes in windy weather
Above the rusty heather."
"You have much gold upon your head,"
They answered all together:
"Buy from us with a golden curl."
She clipped a precious golden lock,
She dropped a tear more rare than pearl,
Then sucked their fruit globes fair or red:

Related Characters: The Goblin Men, Laura (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 8



Explanation and Analysis



Laura longs to buy the luscious forbidden fruit, but having no money of her own, she is uneasy about accepting it as a gift. "Goblin Market" was written in the mid-nineteenth century, at a time when women had few opportunities for advanced education and few career options. Unable to earn sufficient income to support themselves, many Victorian women engaged in prostitution in order to purchase the

necessities of life. Laura becomes aligned with these “fallen” women when she cuts a piece of her golden hair, metaphorically selling herself in exchange for the sensuous pleasures of the fruit, which she sucks until her lips are sore. The goblins, in pointing out the value of Laura’s hair, transform her body into a commodity with market value. The preciousness of Laura’s hair is also a reflection of the special status of hair in Victorian culture. Locks of hair were exchanged with friends, family, and lovers, and these precious mementos were treasured and even transformed into jewelry when a loved one died. Laura symbolically offers a very precious part of herself to predatory goblin men who wish to ensnare her and succeed in seducing her.

“Do you not remember Jeanie,
How she met them in the moonlight,
Took their gifts both choice and many,
Ate their fruits and wore their flowers
Plucked from bowers
Where summer ripens at all hours?
But ever in the noonlight
She pined and pined away;
Sought them by night and day,
Found them no more but dwindled and grew grey;
Then fell with the first snow,
While to this day no grass will grow
Where she lies low:
I planted daisies there a year ago
That never blow.”

Related Characters: Lizzie (speaker), The Goblin Men, Jeanie, Laura

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 9



Explanation and Analysis


When Laura returns home following her encounter with the goblin men, Lizzie meets her at the gate and anxiously tells her a cautionary tale about a young woman named Jeanie. Although Lizzie is too late to prevent Laura from eating the fruit, Jeanie’s story—her seduction by the goblin men, acceptance of their exotic gifts and flowers, abandonment by them, and eventual death—ominously foreshadows a probable outcome for Laura. Although “Goblin Market” is a fantasy, Jeanie’s story also conforms to the pattern of many

nineteenth-century narratives about fallen woman. For example, like Jeanie, the fallen women in these narratives are often seduced by men who make false promises and eventually abandon them. Jeanie’s physical decline, signaled by her prematurely graying hair, and her sterility, symbolized by the barrenness of the ground above her grave, also connect her with representations of fallen women in art and literature who, after being abandoned by their seducers, are denied opportunities for marriage and motherhood and eventually die. Nevertheless, Lizzie’s grim story fails to make an impression on Laura, who immediately after lays out her plan to buy more fruit.

“Golden head by golden head,
Like two pigeons in one nest
Folded in each other’s wings,
They lay down in their curtained bed:
Like two blossoms on one stem,
Like two flakes of new-fall’n snow,
Like two wands of ivory
Tipped with gold for awful kings.”

Related Characters: Lizzie, Laura

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis



After Laura has experienced her metaphorical sexual fall through eating the goblin fruit, and the worried Lizzie has told her cautionary tale about Jeanie, the sisters retire to sleep in the bed they share. This description of the sisters at rest emphasizes their twin-like similarity of appearance—they are “like two blossoms on one stem,” with the same white complexion and golden hair. More importantly, however, it stresses the sisters’ shared moral purity. Laura and Lizzie are compared to pigeons, which are part of the same family as doves and therefore share the dove’s associations with peace, purity, beauty, love, and the soul. They are also compared to flakes of freshly fallen snow and to ivory scepters, pure and precious enough for “awful,” or awe-inspiring, kings to wield. Rossetti’s insistence that Laura and Lizzie—the fallen and morally upright sister—are equally pure is important, because in Victorian society, fallen women like Laura were often considered to be morally defective, corrupt, and capable of contaminating

other women (through their bad example) and whole families (through the spread of venereal disease). By making her fallen woman character morally pure, sympathetic, and identical in nearly every way with her sister, Rossetti seems to reject this view of women's sexuality.

●● One called her proud,
 Cross-grained, uncivil;
 Their tones waxed loud,
 Their looks were evil.
 Lashing their tails
 They trod and hustled her,
 Elbowed and jostled her,
 Clawed with their nails,
 Barking, mewing, hissing, mocking,
 Tore her gown and soiled her stocking,
 Twitched her hair out by the roots,
 Stamped upon her tender feet,
 Held her hands and squeezed their fruits
 Against her mouth to make her eat.

Related Characters: The Goblin Men, Lizzie

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  


Page Number: 15



Explanation and Analysis

As Lizzie predicted, the goblins' fruit has destroyed Laura's health and peace of mind, bringing her to the verge of death like Jeanie before her. Fearing for Laura's life, Lizzie decides to meet the goblins and purchase their fruit, hoping it will work as an antidote and revive her sister. The goblins, however, refuse the coin that Lizzie offers as payment, and after realizing they cannot make her eat with them, they brutally attack her in a way that resembles a sexual assault or attempted rape. Not only do the goblin men claw at her flesh and rip her hair out by the roots, they also tear Lizzie's clothing and soil her stockings, defiling her undergarments. They manipulatively try to shame her for refusing to eat with them and even try to force their fruit into her unwilling mouth, smearing their juices against her face and neck. Lizzie withstands this violent attack for the sake of her sister. In doing so, she risks sexual violation and death at the hands of the goblin men—whom she feared so greatly that she previously abandoned Laura to them—in a Christ-like act of self-sacrifice.

●● White and golden Lizzie stood,
 Like a lily in a flood,—
 Like a rock of blue-veined stone
 Lashed by tides obstreperously,—
 Like a beacon left alone
 In a hoary roaring sea,
 Sending up a golden fire,—
 Like a fruit-crowned orange-tree
 White with blossoms honey-sweet
 Sore beset by wasp and bee,—
 Like a royal virgin town
 Topped with gilded dome and spire
 Close beleaguered by a fleet
 Mad to tug her standard down.

Related Characters: The Goblin Men, Lizzie

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  



Page Number: 16


Explanation and Analysis

As Lizzie withstands a brutal attack by the goblin men, she is physically vulnerable (capable of bleeding, and of having her clothing torn and her hair pulled out) but, morally and spiritually, she remains strong and impervious. Refusing to yield to the goblins, by keeping her mouth tightly closed, Lizzie rejoices in her quiet strength and resolve, and she is described in a series of images that emphasize strength and uprightness in moments of turmoil. For example, Lizzie is simultaneously described as like the fragile lily and the more durable "blue-veined rock," surrounded by flood waters. She is also compared to a solitary, bright beacon, sending out a guiding light to ships in a stormy sea. More pertinently, given that this moment of crisis is characterized by the goblins' sexualized violence, Lizzie is compared to an orange tree, crowned with fruits and blossoms, but attacked by bees and wasps. In the nineteenth century, orange blossoms were worn by brides as a symbol of chastity. By resisting the goblins' violent attempts to make her eat, Lizzie is like the orange tree, which maintains its pure, white blossoms despite being attacked by bees and wasps with their phallic stingers. Lizzie survives the attack and returns to her sister.

●● She cried “Laura,” up the garden,
 “Did you miss me?
 Come and kiss me.
 Never mind my bruises,
 Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
 Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,
 Goblin pulp and goblin dew.
 Eat me, drink me, love me;
 Laura, make much of me:
 For your sake I have braved the glen
 And had to do with goblin merchant men.”

Related Characters: Lizzie (speaker), The Goblin Men, Laura

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis


Realizing that they cannot force Lizzie to eat, the goblins give up and flee. Lizzie rushes home, delighted that she has withstood the goblins' attack and that she has brought back the desired fruit in the form of the juice that covers her body. When she arrives at home, Lizzie instructs her concerned and bewildered sister to ignore her injuries and, instead, to kiss her body and suck her juices. Although this is a moment of sisterly reunion, when the extent of Lizzie's sacrifice is made clear (“For your sake I have braved the glen/ And had to do with goblin merchant men”), the language Lizzie uses is distinctly erotic. Lizzie's invitation to Laura to kiss her and to suck the juices from her body, which might be viewed as not simply sensual but as suggestive of same-sex incestuous desire, sits uneasily alongside Lizzie's later pronouncement to “Eat me, drink me, love me,” which is a paraphrase of Christ's words to his disciples at the Last Supper. Here, Lizzie is thus identified with Christ, who suffered the pains of crucifixion and death in order to save mankind. Lizzie's sacrifice has transformed the once poisonous goblin fruit into a life-giving antidote to save her fallen sister, but her status as a savior in the style of Christ is

complicated by the eroticism of the manner in which she administers the fruit juices to her sister.

●● “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.”

Related Characters: Laura (speaker), Lizzie

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Years later, when Laura and Lizzie have become wives and mothers of young girls, the sisters reminisce about their youth, and Laura anxiously warns the girls about the dangerous, predatory goblin men. More importantly, however, she instructs them to care for and protect one another, “For there is no friend like a sister.” Although the sisters must, at some point, have had husbands, they never appear in the poem as characters. Instead, the poem ends with a vision of an entirely female community. While the fact that Laura and Lizzie become wives and mothers, escaping Jeanie's fate of premature death and sterility, seems fairly conservative, the sentiment that women have a responsibility to care for one another might be viewed as somewhat radical if considered in relation to nineteenth-century ideas about fallen women and women's sexuality. Rossetti was a volunteer at Highgate Penitentiary, working with prostitutes and “fallen” women in a rehabilitative setting at a time when many cultural commentators saw fallen women as morally corrupt and contaminating. Unlike many nineteenth-century authors, Rossetti presents her fallen woman as morally pure and capable of being saved by the love and self-sacrifice of her sister.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

GOBLIN MARKET

[Each morning and evening young women hear the cry of the goblin men, who encourage the women to “come buy” their fruit. The goblins sell a variety of exotic, luscious-sounding fruits that they describe in sensuous terms, including “plump unpeck’d cherries,” “bloom-down-cheek’d peaches,” “wild free-born cranberries,” and “figs to fill your mouth.” The goblins boast of the sweetness and beauty of their offerings, which they encourage women to “taste.”](#)

One evening, two young sisters, Laura and Lizzie, hear the goblins’ call as they are collecting water from a brook. Laura bows her head to better hear their call and Lizzie blushes, although she tries to hide it. With “tingling cheeks and finger tips,” they crouch close together for protection and clasp arms. Laura urges Lizzie to “lie close,” and warns her that they “must not look at goblin men” and “must not buy their fruits” because they do not know in what foreign regions the fruit has grown. Yet, hearing the goblins’ call, Laura “pricks” up her **golden head**.

Lizzie cries out, warning her sister not to “peep” and covering her own eyes “lest they should look,” but Laura rears “her glossy head” and continues to gaze at the goblin men as they tramp and hobble down the glen toward the sisters. Transfixed, Laura encourages Lizzie to open her eyes and watch the goblins proceed. She begins to describe their movements and the dishes, baskets, and plates they are carrying, and to speculate—now longingly rather than fearfully—on the environment in which the “luscious” fruit was grown, imagining “How warm the wind must blow / Thro’ those fruit bushes.”

[Lizzie, however, refuses to look. She again warns her sister that they should not allow themselves to be charmed by the goblins’ fruits and wares, which she calls “their evil gifts.” Thrusting a “dimpled finger” in each ear and closing her eyes, Lizzie runs away. The “curious Laura,” however, is transfixed, and makes the decision to linger in the glen with the goblins.](#)

Where the goblins come from and why they target women is never explained. They are simply a fixture of the unidentified, idyllic, rural environment in which the poem is set, and seem to exist only in order to tempt young women into buying and eating their fruit. The way the goblins describe their fruit is pointedly sexual and suggestive of ripeness and voluptuousness. The goblins’ evocative language is intended to seduce women by encouraging them to imagine the pleasures of eating their fruit.



At this point in the poem, it is unclear exactly why the goblins are so dangerous, but both sisters seem instinctively to recognize that the goblins pose a sexual threat. Rossetti’s language in this passage emphasizes the sisters’ bodily response to the goblins. Lizzie’s desire to hide her head and conceal her blushes and the sisters’ “tingling cheeks and fingertips” suggest that they are titillated or sexually aroused by contact with the goblins. They are fearful, but also curious, and sexual curiosity was believed by many Victorians to be dangerous to women.



Lizzie tries to prevent her sister from endangering herself by looking at the goblins. However, Laura’s curiosity proves to be too great a temptation, and she not only looks at the goblins but tempts Lizzie to look as well. The exotic nature of the fruit, which initially frightens Laura, now excites her—this plays into European fears of foreigners (particular those from colonized nations) as being primitive, sinful, and overly sexual. By giving in to temptation and satisfying her sexual curiosity, Laura is transgressing the boundaries of acceptable behavior for women at the time.



Lizzie is not just fearful of the goblins and the consequences of eating their fruit, but also of the strength of her own sexual desire and curiosity, which is evidenced by her “tingling cheeks and fingertips.” Such feelings were widely considered to be unwomanly and inappropriate. This fear is so strong that Lizzie abandons her own sister.



[Laura watches as the goblin men approach her, and takes notice of each goblin's appearance. Not only do their bodies share characteristics in common with animals, including a cat, a rat, a snail, a wombat, and a ratel \(honey badger\), but some of the goblins' voices sound like the cooing of doves: soft, kind, and pleasant.](#)

Laura stretches her “gleaming neck” towards the goblin men, like a swan or “a vessel at the launch / When its last restraint is gone.”

Meanwhile, the goblins are tramping backwards up the glen, continuing to call out, “Come buy, Come buy.” Their cries have become intensified and urgent, and instead of sounding like cooing doves, they are “shrill.” Upon reaching Laura, they leer and slyly signal to one another. The goblins set out their wares before Laura. One weaves a crown of exotic tendrils, nuts, and leaves (“Men sell not such in any town”), while another heaves a heavy golden dish laden with **fruit** to offer her. Still, they continue to cry out “come buy, come buy.”

Laura stares, but does not move. She desires the fruit but has no money to offer in exchange. Nevertheless, the goblin merchants continue to try to tempt her to sample their **fruit** without paying. One speaks in “tones as smooth as honey,” while others purr, speak to her in a friendly way, and jollily call out like a parrot “Pretty Goblin” instead of “Pretty Polly.”

Laura knows that she ought not to accept the **fruit** without being able to pay. She hastily explains this to the goblins, regretting that she has no coin to offer in exchange and that to accept their fruit under these conditions would be to steal or to purloin it. As she explains, the only “gold” she has is “on the furze,” in the natural world.

*The goblins' resemblance to animals suggests that they are wild, untamed, and dangerous. Some of the animals are commonplace but distinctly predatory, like the cat, and may suggest that the goblins intend to take young women for their prey. Interestingly, Holman Hunt's famous painting of a fallen woman, *The Awakening Conscience* (1853), includes the image of a cat playing with a bird before killing it, symbolizing the predatory behavior of men who seduce women and then discard them (Hunt was known to Rossetti through his involvement in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, established by her brother).*



This is the moment when Laura loses her self-restraint, which previously made her cautious of the goblin men. It is presented as a point of no return, ominously foreshadowing her eventual metaphorical “fall” through eating the forbidden fruit.



The goblins' slyness suggests that they intend to trick or deceive Laura in some way, while the word “leer,” meaning to look at in an unpleasant and lascivious way, emphasizes that their trick has a sexual element. Essentially, the goblins conspire together to tempt Laura, laying out their luscious fruit on a golden dish and weaving her a crown as a gift. They understand that, in choosing to linger, Laura is interested in them and their fruit and will be receptive to their persuasions.



The goblins attempt to delight, persuade, and flatter Laura into accepting their fruit. Laura's scruples about not being able to pay for it are significant. She does not want to be in their debt, perhaps because of the goblins' reputations or because there is something unseemly about accepting a present from dangerous (goblin) men. She is also generally presented as an innocent and honorable woman, and finds it dishonest to take the fruit without paying.



Laura explains that she cannot pay because all her “gold is on the furze,” another name for gorse: a yellow, floral shrub. This statement emphasizes Laura's relationship to the natural world, which, like other sources of wealth, keeps her fed and sustained. It is also suggestive of her rural innocence and inexperience.



The goblins, however, point to Laura's **golden hair** as an adequate payment and urge her to clip one of her curls to offer in exchange for the **fruit**. Laura agrees and clips the desired lock of hair, dropping "a tear more rare than pearl."

Laura immediately begins to suck the **fruit** that is presented to her. The fruits' flavor is unlike anything she has ever tasted, "Sweeter than honey from the rock, / Stronger than man-rejoicing wine." No matter how much she eats, she does not grow tired of its flavor. It does not satisfy her hunger either. She continues to suck at the fruit until her lips are sore and she is in a state of total bewilderment.

[When she finishes gorging on the fruit, Laura flings the rinds away and gathers up a kernel stone or fruit pit to bring home with her. Unaware of her surroundings and whether it is night or day, Laura makes her way home alone. When she arrives, Lizzie is waiting for her at the garden gate, and proceeds to scold her with "wise upbraids."](#)

Lizzie again warns Laura of the dangers of loitering in the glen at midnight because it is haunted by goblin men. Lizzie asks Laura if she remembers the fate of Jeanie, who met the goblins in the moonlight, accepted their gifts, ate their **fruit**, and wore their flowers, but then pined away when the goblins abandoned her. Jeanie's **hair** grew grey before she died in her prime. No grass will grow upon Jeanie's grave, nor will the daisies that Lizzie planted there a year ago. Lizzie finishes her lesson by reiterating that Laura should not loiter in the dark glen with the dangerous goblin men.

Refusing to accept Laura's reasons for not taking the fruit, the goblins persuade her to cut a lock of her hair to offer in exchange. In doing so, the goblins symbolically transform Laura's hair into a commodity with commercial value. She symbolically sells herself for the forbidden fruit, and this act strongly aligns her with the fallen woman in Victorian culture.



Laura's sensual enjoyment of the fruit—which she "sucked until her lips were sore"—is juxtaposed with biblical references. The phrases "honey from the rock" and "man-rejoicing wine" allude to God's provision of good things for his faithful followers. That the goblin fruit seems sweeter than that honey and stronger than that wine suggests that its goodness is only an illusion and that in accepting and preferring it, Laura is being led away from God.



The goblins' fruit has a mind-altering effect on Laura. Her bewilderment and lack of awareness of her surroundings foreshadows the anxiety, sorrow, and absentmindedness she will experience due to her fixation on the deadly fruit (already indicated by her removal of the fruit pit). Lizzie's scolding is useless because the fruit has already poisoned Laura's mind and destroyed her peace.



Lizzie's scolding is useless to Laura, who has already succumbed to temptation and eaten the fruit. This is, however, the first time the reader is presented with evidence of the goblins' dangerous effects on women. Lizzie's cautionary tale about Jeanie, who ate their fruit, was abandoned, and died in her prime, foreshadows a probable fate for Laura. Jeanie's story might also be read metaphorically; it reflects a common trajectory for fallen women in Victorian literature and art, one in which they experience a sexual "fall," are abandoned by their seducers, and eventually die. The barrenness of Jeanie's grave, on which no vegetation will grow, symbolizes the way that the goblins have robbed her of opportunities for marriage and motherhood—which the Victorians viewed as the ideal state for women.



[Laura, however, dismisses her sister's concerns, telling her to "hush." Laura explains that although she ate her fill of goblin fruit, her mouth still waters for it, and so she has resolved to meet the goblins on the following night in order to purchase more. Laura tries to reassure her sister of the fruit's goodness. Kissing Lizzie, she describes with rapture the delicious and varied fruit she sampled: plums, cherries, figs, melons, peaches, and grapes, and she speculates about their growing conditions.](#) She offers to bring them home to her sister on the following night.

The two sisters then retire to sleep in the same bed, "**Golden head** by golden head," and with their arms enfolding one another. They are lulled to sleep by the wind and their peaceful slumber is undisturbed by the sound of owls and bats. They sleep "Cheek to cheek and breast to breast."

The following morning, Laura and Lizzie awaken to the sound of a cock crowing. Immediately, they begin their usual chores: fetching honey, milking cows and feeding livestock, cleaning and airing their home, preparing food, and sewing. While their talk appears to be typical of "modest maidens," Lizzie is content while Laura is absent-minded and sick with longing for the goblin **fruit**.

Finally, evening arrives and Laura and Lizzie set out with their pitchers to draw water from the brook. While Lizzie is calm and untroubled, Laura is eager for another encounter with the goblins. Lizzie initially occupies herself by picking purple and golden "flags," but as the sun sets, she encourages Laura to return home with her, noting that "not another maiden lags," and observing that the animals are all at rest.

Laura does not yet realize the danger she is in, but her admission that she still hungers for the fruit despite eating a great deal of it alerts the reader to this danger. The sensuous language Laura uses to describe the fruit to Lizzie is also significant. As if adopting the goblins' way of speaking, Laura tries to tempt Lizzie with the offer of fruit.



The profound peacefulness of the sisters' slumber is the calm before the storm. Shortly thereafter, Laura will become obsessed with the goblin fruit that she can no longer buy. Lying together in the same bed, the sisters are described interchangeably with imagery that emphasizes their purity, innocence, and inherent worth. This is important because, according to nineteenth-century beliefs, so-called fallen women were often considered to be impure and contaminated. Rossetti rejects such a view.



The sisters are presented as model homemakers in the style of the so-called "Angel in the House," an important Victorian cultural figure created and popularized by Coventry Patmore. According to nineteenth-century mores, ideal women were supposed to be meticulous household managers who were committed to making their homes as comfortable as possible for their families. That Laura is absentmindedly fulfilling these duties shows the reader that something is wrong.



Lizzie's contentment is contrasted with her sister's worried, intense desire for the goblin fruit; this shows that it has already poisoned Laura's mind and destroyed her inner peace. Lizzie's gathering of flags, or irises, might also be an allusion to Mary, the mother of Jesus. According to floriology, or the symbolic language of flowers, irises are symbols of the Virgin Mary. Once commonly called "sword lilies," the iris is associated with the pain that pierced Mary when Jesus was crucified. In Lizzie's hand, irises seem to foreshadow her act of self-sacrifice for her sister.



Laura refuses to come away, loitering among the rushes in hope that the goblins will return. She tells Lizzie that it is still early and the dew has not yet fallen. Although she listens for the goblins' cry, she never hears them. Lizzie, however, becomes alarmed when she hears the goblins, and again urges Laura to come home with her: "I hear the **fruit**-call but I dare not look." Laura, on hearing this, turns "cold as stone." Realizing that she cannot buy the fruit she so desperately craves distresses her, but she does not reveal her sorrow to her sister. She trudges home with Lizzie and goes to bed. Waiting until Lizzie is asleep, Laura weeps and gnashes her teeth in despair.

Laura is heartbroken at discovering that she cannot hear the call of the goblin men and, therefore, cannot buy their fruit. Like Jeanie before her, the goblins have abandoned Laura after giving her a tantalizing taste of their forbidden fruit. Laura conceals her despair from Lizzie, perhaps because Lizzie has already warned her about the goblins, but perhaps also because Laura feels ashamed of the strength of her desire. Again, Laura is aligned with the figure of the fallen woman in Victorian culture, who is often represented as consumed with regret and despair, especially after she has been forsaken by her seducer.



For several days and nights, Laura silently keeps watch in hope that the goblins will reappear, but she never sees or hears them again. In her sorrow and anxiety, Laura becomes decrepit and her **hair** turns thin and gray. One day, she remembers the kernel stone that she brought back with her from her first meeting with the goblins. She plants it in a sunny spot and waters it with her tears, but it will not grow **fruit**. As Laura becomes weaker and older looking, she dreams of the fruit in the way that a traveler in the desert dreams of an oasis and becomes thirstier. After this, Laura neglects the household tasks that she previously shared with her sister, no longer cleaning, tending to the livestock, cooking, or even drawing water from the brook. Instead, she sits, "listless in the chimney-nook," and does not eat.

Without the goblin fruit, Laura is overcome with grief. Her once golden hair is transformed, becoming thin and gray like an old woman's—just as Jeanie's did. Laura's hair is an extension of herself and a reflection of her spiritual, emotional, and physical health—or unwellness in this instance. Furthermore, Laura's inability to grow more fruit suggests that she has become, in some sense, barren and unable to support life. If the goblins' exotic fruit represents a desire for forbidden things that were deemed unacceptable for women at the time, the fruit also makes it impossible for Laura to survive in her once accustomed role as a domestic woman.



Lizzie, full of tenderness for her sister, can no longer bear to see Laura suffering. Unlike Laura, Lizzie continues to hear the goblins' cry each night and morning. Lizzie longs to buy the goblins' **fruit** to comfort Laura but fears the consequences of this. She remembers the fate of Jeanie, who "should have been a bride;/ But who for joys brides hope to have/ Fell sick and died" in the prime of her life. Eventually, Laura's health deteriorates so dramatically that she seems to be on the verge of death. Lizzie then stops deliberating. She puts a silver penny in her purse, kisses Laura goodbye, crosses the heath at twilight, and goes in search of the goblin men at the brook. For the first time in her life, she listens and looks around her.

Laura's overwhelming desire for the goblin fruit causes her to age prematurely. She refuses food, begins to waste away, and is brought to the brink of death. At this point, cautious Lizzie overcomes her fear of the goblin men and of the consequences of interacting them and decides to meet the goblins at nightfall to purchase fruit for Laura. Lizzie prepares for this act of sisterly self-sacrifice by putting a silver penny in her purse to use as payment, showing that she is more cautious and aware of the goblins' threat than Laura was.



[The goblins laugh to find Lizzie looking for them. They hobble, run, and fly toward her, noisy and grimacing. They hug, kiss, squeeze, and caress her, stretching out dishes and plates and inviting her to look at and taste their luscious fruits. They seductively invite Lizzie to "Bob at our cherries" and "Bite at our peaches," urging her to "Pluck them and suck them," but Lizzie, remembering the fate of Jeanie, does not eat. Instead, she holds out her apron and asks them to fill it with fruit, then tosses them a penny with which to pay.](#)

The goblins mistakenly believe that Lizzie is susceptible to their seductive sales pitch. They try to tempt her, describing their fruit in a deliberately sexual way and urging Lizzie to imagine its taste and the feel of the fruit in her mouth. Lizzie refuses their offers, however, and instead attempts to purchase the fruit, tossing them a silver penny as payment.



The goblins try to persuade Lizzie to sit and eat with them, protesting that their feast has just started and reassuring her that the night is early and warm. They warn Lizzie that the **fruit** will lose its juiciness and flavor if it is transported from the glen. Lizzie continues to refuse, however, explaining that Laura is waiting at home for her, and she tells the goblins to toss her back her penny if they will not sell her the fruit. The goblins, confused and angry, begin to insult her and accuse her of pride and incivility. Their once sweet toned voices become loud and their looks become “evil.” Their anger escalates and they begin to attack Lizzie, pulling out her **hair** by the roots, clawing at her body, stamping on her feet, ripping her gown, and attempting to force their fruit into her mouth to make her eat.

Lizzie resists their attack, like “a beacon left alone/ In a hoary roaring sea,/ Sending up a golden fire,” or “Like a royal virgin town/ Topped with gilded dome and spire/ Close beleaguered by a fleet/ Mad to tug her standard down.” Though the goblins try various tactics to make her eat, pinching, scratching, coaxing and mocking her, Lizzie withstands their attack, refusing to open her mouth and eat: she “Would not open lip from lip/ Lest they should cram a mouthful in.” Instead, she internally laughs to feel the **fruit** juices covering her face and neck. Finally, the goblins are worn out by Lizzie’s resistance. They fling back her penny, kick their fruit home and disappear, leaving Lizzie victorious.

With an aching body and in a mental daze, Lizzie runs home. She is no longer afraid of the goblins but pleased to have escaped with her coin. Her kind intentions to help Laura cause her to quicken her pace. When she reaches the garden, she cries out to Laura: “Did you miss me?/ Come and kiss me./ Never mind my bruises,/ Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices.” She explains that for Laura’s sake, she has braved an encounter with the dangerous goblin men and invites her sister to “Eat me, drink me, love me.”

Lizzie’s determination to pay for the fruit with money, rather than offering a lock of her hair as payment (like Laura) or accepting the fruit as a gift or debt (like Jeanie) is significant. If read symbolically through the lens of nineteenth-century anxieties about women’s sexuality, Lizzie refuses to become “fallen,” even though she risks much for her sister’s sake simply by meeting and talking to the dangerous goblin men at nightfall. When the goblins realize they cannot seduce or persuade Lizzie to eat of her own free will, they change tactics, becoming violent and brutal. Their attack, during which they batter Lizzie’s body and attempt to cram food into her mouth, strongly evokes a sexual assault or attempted rape.



Lizzie is described at length using imagery that symbolizes strength, purity, and moral uprightness in the midst of trouble and danger. She is compared to “a royal virgin town” with a “gilded dome and spire,” an allusion to her white skin, golden hair, and innate purity and which also seems to align her with Christian cities under siege by invading forces. Try as they might, the goblins cannot “tug her standard down” or force her to debase herself by eating their fruit. Importantly, despite the fact that she is physically violated by the goblins, who scratch her flesh and tear her gown—an image of sexual violence—they cannot defile her purity or force her to “open lip from lip” to eat their fruit.



Lizzie’s mental daze mirrors Laura’s after meeting the goblins and eating their fruit for the first time. This mirroring or replication of experiences, which might seem like a minor detail, is significant; it suggests that Lizzie’s sacrifice will undo or reverse the damage caused to her sister by eating the fruit, bringing them back to the idyllic, peaceful lives they previously enjoyed. In light of the poem’s many biblical resonances, it is also possible to read this moment of mirroring as alluding to the traditional Christian belief that Mary was the second Eve who reversed the curses brought on humanity by the first Eve’s disobedience to God. Lizzie, aligned with Mary, saves her fallen sister, Laura, who is aligned with Eve. Lizzie’s act of self-sacrifice also aligns her with Christ, who experienced the pain of crucifixion and death in order to save the world from sin. Lizzie’s Christlike nature is emphasized by her instruction to Laura: “Eat me, drink me, love me.” This echoes Christ’s words to his disciples at the Last Supper, during which he told them to eat his body and drink his blood.



[Laura leaps up from her chair and pulls at her hair. She fearfully asks Lizzie if she has eaten the goblins' fruit and wonders whether her sister will begin to wither and age as she has. She fears that Lizzie's life will be ruined and wasted like her own.](#)

Clinging to her sister, Laura begins to kiss Lizzie. With that kiss, tears return to refresh Laura's once-dry and shrunken eyes. Shaking with pain, Laura continues to kiss Lizzie "with a hungry mouth." Laura's lips begin to "scorch" as she sucks the juices from her sister's face, and the once deliciously sweet **fruit** becomes bitter and repulsive like "wormwood." Like someone "possessed," Laura writhes, leaps, sings, and tears at her clothing. Laura's "locks streamed like the torch/ Borne by a racer at full speed," and she now looks "like a caged thing freed." A "Swift fire spread[s] thro' her veins" as she continues to gorge on the bitter fruit juice. She then falls down, unconscious, "Like the watch-tower of a town/ Which an earthquake shatters down." It is not immediately clear if Laura is dead or alive.

Throughout the night, Lizzie keeps watch over Laura. She takes on the role of a nurse, counting Laura's pulse and checking her breathing, giving her water and cooling her face with tears. When morning arrives, heralded by the sounds of birds and agricultural workers and the opening of flowers, Laura awakens transformed. She laughs in her old innocent way and embraces Lizzie. Her **hair** returns to its golden color, showing "not one thread of grey," and her youthfulness is restored.

[Years pass, during which Laura and Lizzie have become wives and mothers, and they worry about the safety of their children. Laura calls the children to her and tells them pleasant stories of her girlhood. However, she also tells them about her dangerous encounter with the "wicked, quaint fruit-merchant men," whose fruits were "like honey to the throat/ But poison in the blood." She tells the children about how Lizzie saved her by risking her life and braving an attack from the goblin men. Then Laura, "joining hands to little hands," tells the children to "cling together": "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."](#)

On hearing that Lizzie braved a meeting with the goblin men, Laura is distraught, and begins tearing her hair in grief. She fears that Lizzie will become dejected, listless, and withered just as she has become.



Sucking the fruit juices from her sister's battered body, which she "kissed and kissed" "with a hungry mouth," Laura begins to revive. This miraculous moment of healing, brought about by Lizzie's Christ-like act of self-sacrifice, is also sexually charged and homoerotic, indicating that the poem lends itself to more complex readings than just religious allegory or fairytale. When sucked from her sister's body, the delicious but poisonous fruit is transformed into a bitter but restorative medicine. After Laura drinks it, she seemingly loses control of her body, leaping and writhing like one possessed. In contrast to the erect, upright imagery associated with Lizzie's ability to withstand the goblin attack, Laura is compared to towers that crumble during an earthquake and a ship's mast struck by lightning. Like Christ, who withstood crucifixion and death before rising from the dead to eternal life, Laura seems temporarily to succumb to the ordeal and drops down as if dead.



Lizzie, who has just withstood a violent physical assault, cares for her sister throughout the night. On waking in the morning, the siblings find that Laura has been restored to health and youth; symbolically, Laura's life, which seemed to be at risk, has dawned again. Her hair has been restored to its golden color, signifying the return of her health, joy, and peace of mind.



That both Laura and Lizzie become wives and mothers is significant. In many nineteenth-century narratives and works of art, fallen women die, are transported out of England and into the colonies, or are otherwise denied opportunities for marriage and motherhood—which, together, were commonly viewed as the ideal state for women at that time. With Laura and Lizzie, Rossetti seems to counter the pervasive message that fallen women were largely irredeemable. Laura's instruction to her own and Lizzie's daughters to support one another and cling together "For there is no friend like a sister," creates a vision of female solidarity and care to counter the dangers of predatory (goblin) men.





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