A Psychoanalytic Reading of “Goblin Market”

Christina Rossetti’s poem “Goblin Market” appears to be a poem centering around two young girls, Laura and Lizzie, and the temptations they encounter as they journey through the goblin market. However, these characters may not be what they seem. Although Laura and Lizzie seem to be sisters, they may, in fact, symbolize two sides in the mind of a single person.

To begin with, the girls’ names are interestingly similar. The names “Laura” and “Lizzie” sound alike. Their names are both two-syllable names and begin with letter “L.” Furthermore, each girl’s name ends with a vowel. Thus, the reader could easily confuse one girl for the other because these names are phonetically similar. This literary technique suggests the girls may be a single being.

Moreover, Rossetti utilizes descriptive imagery of two things intertwined as one to create an image that Laura and Lizzie are one person. Rossetti delineates this early on in the poem. “Golden head by golden head, / Like two pigeons in one nest / Folded in each other’s wings,…Cheek to cheek and breast to breast / Lock’d together in one nest” (184-198). The girls are “lock’d together” as if there was no way to separate them; they are “cheek to cheek and breast to breast.” The girls are “in one nest,” and that “nest” could mean a body or mind in which they are contained. Also, in line 202, Rossetti creates the image of the two girls waking together: “Laura rose with Lizzie.” This illustration makes Laura and Lizzie seem like elements in one body, like one cannot rise without the other.
Furthermore, when Lizzie tells Laura to come along because “not another maiden lags,” it suggests that there is only one maiden left in the night: the mysterious person in which Laura and Lizzie are manifested.

Although these girls are close in name, they represent different components of the human psyche. According to Freud’s theory on the division of the mind, the human psyche is divided into three different parts: the id, ego, and superego. The id is driven by pleasure and demands satisfaction regardless of consequences. The ego conforms the desires of the id into reality. The extreme of the id is the superego, which focuses on feelings of guilt as a means to enforce rules of society.

Lizzie is identified with elements of the superego and, later in the poem, the ego. Firstly, she is described as “white and golden / Like a lily in a flood” (408-9). Secondly, the name “Lizzie,” of Hebrew origin, means “God’s oath.” Thus, Lizzie is associated with purity, innocence, and religious piety. She is constantly dulling all her senses to avoid temptation. For example, Lizzie “veil’d her blushes” the first time she sees the goblin men (35). As Laura continues to move closer to the goblins, Lizzie covers her eyes and “thrust a dimpled finger / In each ear” (67-8). She hears the cries of the goblins to “Come buy, come buy,” (232) but she refuses the temptation: “Oh Laura, come; / I hear the fruit-call but I dare not look” (242-3). Lizzie believes these goblin men are evil; she anticipates the dangerous consequences that will come by eating their fruits. “Poor Laura could not hear; / Long’d to buy fruit to comfort her, / But fear’d to pay too dear”
Hence, Lizzie does recognize these temptations, but she chooses to suppress her senses to avoid falling prey to the cries of the goblins.

Lizzie serves as the conscience and encourages what is right and good. She tries to warn Laura of the dangers the goblin men present. Acting as the superego, Lizzie cautions Laura when they first encounter the goblins: “Oh,’ cried Lizzie, ‘Laura, Laura, / You should not peep at goblin men” (48-9). Lizzie acts as the motherly voice and word of caution in the mind of the speaker. “Dear, you should not stay so late, / Twilight is not good for maidens” (143-4).

She also describes what happened to Jeanie, a young girl who gave into temptation, to warn Laura of the goblins. By using guilt as a means of repressing the urges of Laura, the id, Lizzie exhibits the essential characteristics associated with the superego.

Even though Lizzie comes close to eating the goblins’ fruits, she resists. She is an innocent virgin who is ‘raped’ by the goblin men.

They trod and hustled her,
Elbow’d and jostled her,
Claw’d with their nails,
Barking, mewing, hissing, mocking,
Tore her gown and soil’d her stocking,
Twitch’d her hair out by the roots,
Stamped upon her tender feet,
Held her hands and squeez’d their fruits
Against her mouth to make her eat. (399-407)

Lizzie refuses to give in despite the goblins’ violence. Although “One may lead a horse to water, / Twenty cannot make him drink” (422-3). The juice of the fruits “syrupp’d all her face” (434); however, “Lizzie utter’d not a word; / Would not
Thus, Lizzie remains aware of the consequences of giving into temptation and maintains the qualities associated with the superego.

Lizzie, however, begins to display characteristics more typical of the ego than the superego after the fruit juices saturate her pure face. This act suggests that Lizzie has found a way to reconcile both the desires of the id and the self-reproach of the superego. Hence, Lizzie becomes more of a medium and acts as the ego of the psyche. She has gotten just a small taste of the forbidden fruits, which causes her compromise her feelings of guilt and passion.

Laura, on the other hand, exemplifies the passion and desires associated with the id of the human psyche. Whereas Lizzie tries to suppress her senses, Laura’s senses are running wild. After consuming the goblins’ fruit, she “Then sat up in a passionate yearning / And gnash’d her teeth for baulk’d desire” (266-7). Like the id, Laura’s desires demand instant gratification. Rossetti describes her as “most like a leaping flame” (218). She is “longing for the night,” a time of mystery, adventure, and things forbidden (214). The fruits of the goblin men tempt her so much that she clips off “a precious golden lock” of her hair since she does not have any money (126). The golden locks of her hair may be “precious,” but Laura is willing to sacrifice her most precious asset to partake in these forbidden fruits. Even the way her consumption of the fruit is described expresses the immense amount of passion she possesses:

“Then suck’d their fruit globes fair or red:
Sweeter than honey from the rock,
Stronger than man-rejoicing wine,
Clearer than water flow’d that juice;
She never tasted such before (127-132)
The act of eating the fruits is described with such color and imagery. The fruit is associated with red, a color symbolizing passion, lust, and all that is forbidden. This vivid illustration allows the reader to understand the extent of the superego’s inner desires and just how tempting these strange fruits are to Laura.

Moreover, she is described as “sweet-tooth Laura” (115). Only the fruits of the goblin men, “sweeter than honey,” can satisfy her “sweet tooth.” “She suck’d and suck’d and suck’d the more / Fruits which that unknown orchard bore; / She suck’d until her lips were sore” (134-6). Laura devours the fruits with insatiable delight. However, Laura can only be temporarily satisfied. She constantly craves more and more of the goblins’ fruits. “‘I ate and ate my fill / Yet my mouth waters still; / To-morrow night I will / Buy more” (165-8). Laura is filled with such immense desires for pleasure that she becomes animal-like, just as the goblins are described. “Laura stretch’d her gleaming neck / Like a rush-imbedded swan...Like a vessel at the launch / When its last restraint is gone” (81-86). Laura shows no restraint; she devours the goblin’s fruit without considering the severe consequences.

In conclusion, the voice of reason, Lizzie, dominates the psyche that is intensely driven by Laura, the superego. Lizzie acts as the conscience, the “angel on one’s shoulder,” in the poem. Her name, meaning “God’s oath,” is interestingly fitting. Laura, in contrast, yearns for instantaneous pleasure without considering moral consequences. She acts not as the angel but the devil; she is on the other extreme of the moral spectrum. In the end, the voice of reason triumphs. The similarity between the girls’ names and the vivid imagery of their
unifying sisterhood suggest they are one and the same. Although Laura and Lizzie are created as named individuals, they are merely elements of a single individual. Rossetti uses several literary techniques to produce a sense of unity between the two. Furthermore, the differences in their behavior suggest they represent various aspects of the human psyche.