Language is composed of words; words have meaning. This statement is as simple of an understanding of language as there will ever be. Linguists may argue about how people interpret language, but one of the most interesting arguments is that people understand a word only because they can understand the opposite of that word (Fromkin). Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” is a wonderful example of how language influences the reader through use of binary opposites. Rossetti uses precise diction to emphasize the opposite of what may be a superficial reading of the text, creating more depth and mystery in this twisted fairy tale.

In this poem, goblins tempt a young girl, named Laura, to eat their fruit, even after she is warned by her sister, Lizzie, not to. Another girl, Jeanie, had previously eaten the fruit and died, unmarried, because of it. Laura falls into temptation anyways and offers a lock of hair and a tear in exchange for a taste. She is then consumed by her yearning for another taste of the fruit and falls sick, withering away into certain death. Lizzie cannot stand to see her sister in this state, so she approaches the goblins and offers to buy the fruit with money. The goblins will not accept this as currency, but Lizzie refuses to give them anything else. The goblins become angry and try to force Lizzie to eat their fruit by smashing them on her, but she resists and only gathers the juices from the fruit on herself. She runs home to Laura and asks Laura to, “hug me, kiss me, suck my juices” (467) and “eat me, drink me, love me” (470). Laura is cured of her yearning of the fruit by this
Many critical readings of “Goblin Market” exist. The most popular include that this poem is about homosexuality, commerce, drug addiction, feminism, loss of innocence, religion and ritual, or anorexia. All of those elements can be supported by the text, but when reading this text strictly as diction creating binary opposites the previous theories offered may support and disagree at the same time. A deconstructionist reading of the text allows all of the binary oppositions to be looked at as if they stand alone, especially the ones that do not seem as central to the story (Lynn).

One of the most interesting binary opposites is the theme of brotherhood and sisterhood. The goblins are referred to as brothers with, “brother with queer brother” (94) and “brother with sly brother” (96). In fact, a special emphasis is placed on this concept of brotherhood because the lines parallel each other. This emphasis is also placed on Laura and Lizzie's relationship. This theme is heavily echoed throughout the poem and most especially at the very end. This is the moral of the story, which is:

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. (561-566)

Those last lines are compelling and actually lead the reader to feel great about the wonderful bond of sisterhood and how that bond can withstand anything. To understand this concept of sisterhood, the reader must see sisterhood as a binary opposite. The opposite of sisterhood is brotherhood. The brotherhood offered as this opposite is, of course, the evil band of goblins who try to tear apart the sisterhood. The goblins are evil, yet they never fight with each other and work to achieve common goals. Only sisterhood is threatened. Only Laura and Lizzie fight each other and corrupt their own sisterhood.

While the reader is shown this dueling within the sisterhood, the brotherhood and sisterhood pair can only exist together in this world.
Without one, the other cannot exist. Who will the goblins sell their fruit to, if not the sisters or the sisterhood of women? This sisterhood also holds power over the brotherhood of goblins because women are the only ones who consume the fruit. Never in the text, are the goblins attempting to sell their fruit to men. Even if the goblin may represent men, as some critics suggest, the men or goblin do not sell fruit to each other, only to women. Women or sisters cannot band together unless threatened by men or goblins.

Women also seem not able to exist on their own. Jeanie did not have a sister to look out for her and thus she perished. If Laura did not have Lizzie then she would also perish. Lizzie is the only one who seems to be able to stand alone. She can be independent and use her own resourcefulness to save Lizzie. The only way that Lizzie can be independent, though, is that she has to have a sister to save or else it possibly may never have occurred to her to be independent.

Rossetti’s own background may have been an influence for this extra emphasis on sisterhood. As Aijun Senaha explains in his article “A Punishment Required: Pleasure of Pain in Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market’” an emancipation movement for women was occurring in England around the time that Rossetti wrote “Goblin Market.” Women were fighting to legally own their own property, especially married women. They also wanted to be treated as patients by doctors just as men were treated, because any woman that was considered “fallen,” which was basically any woman with any sexually transmitted disease, was treated as a prostitute. This movement led to a feeling of sisterhood among British women as they united to fight against the inequalities of the laws during that period. Rossetti was especially influenced because she, “confirmed her religious faith, witnessed and experienced the facts of fallen women, and met Florence Nightingale” (Senaha 22). All of this history may have been what prompted Rossetti to imbue “Goblin Market” with such a strong theme of sisterhood.

The opposition of sisterhood versus brotherhood in the poem can easily be seen as men vs. women, or goblin vs. women, or even monster or other vs. humanity. All of those binary pairs are substantiated in this text. The moral of the story, the conclusion, is that sisterhood is an illusion and nonexistent unless there is “stormy weather” (562). One cannot be “fetched” unless one goes “astray” (564) and one can-
not be “lifted” unless one “totters down” (565). Sisterhood cannot exist without brotherhood, whether it is evil or not, and brotherhood cannot exist without sisterhood.

Within this text, sisterhood and brotherhood also suggest the concept of good vs. evil and hero vs. villain. Why are the goblins evil, especially if we are to consider them to be men? The reader knows that sisterhood is good, because of the context it is placed within the text. Sisterhood is never really given much of a description until the conclusion of the poem, so the reason that we know that sisterhood is good is because we know how evil the goblins are. They are described as animals:

One had a cat’s face  
One whisk’d a tail,  
One tramp’d at a rat’s pace,  
One crawl’d like a snail,  
One like a wombat prowl’d obtuse and furry,  
One like a ratel tumbled hurry skurry. (71-76)

They are inhuman and cannot possess in their characters any trace of humanity. They “cry” (2) and “call” (46) for women to buy their fruit. The emphasis with this diction is immediate and berating. There will be no negotiations, no sweet talk, only “come buy, come buy” (4).

Beginning with line 147, the tale of Jeanie is retold by Lizzie for Laura’s sake, that the goblins are evil and villainous. The lesson is that any association with the goblins will cause you to fade away (156) and die where “no grass will grow” (158) on your grave. The reader is hit over the head with the fact that the goblins are evil and villains. If they are only men and only merchants, as some critics believe, than the fact that goblins are portrayed as such evil beings seems to be a huge statement by Rossetti, which may be the lesson she learned through her experience with “fallen” women.

The goblins are the bad guys, so who is the hero in this tale? The first suggestion would be Lizzie. She saves Laura from certain death and from not having flowers grow on her grave when she will eventually die. She resists the temptation and seduction of the fruit in favor of saving Laura. The definition of a hero in this case is one who
resists temptation and who can “fetch one if one goes astray” (564), in reference to Lizzie saving Laura. This conclusion isn’t a stretch of the imagination.

What may be interesting is to suppose that Laura is also a hero. The only way that the poem works its way to its beautiful conclusion is that Laura must fall from grace in order for Lizzie to save her. Beyond this, Laura may also be the braver of the two sisters. In this vein, Elizabeth Campbell focuses on how the poem is a statement attesting to women’s capacity to take control of their lives through the use of economics. Campbell views the sisters as two halves of one whole. Lizzie is the 19th century’s version of the “obedient female” (402) and Laura is Eve and Pandora (402) from biblical and Greek myth. Campbell’s conclusion is, “Lizzie has completely assimilated the female social code and sees the woman’s confined place and her domestic duty as sacred, while Laura is willing to risk breaking the code and the barrier in order to gain knowledge of the market-place forbidden to women” (403). Laura is the hero for attempting to gain knowledge, even if it is forbidden. It is also only Laura’s risk-taking behavior that allows Lizzie to step up as the ultimate hero, because without Laura, Lizzie wouldn’t have anyone to save.

Along these same lines of good and evil is the binary pair love and hate. Love is as prevalent in this poem as the theme of sisterhood. Lizzie’s bravery in being assaulted by the goblins in order to save her sister is the best example of true love in this poem. Critics have argued if this is merely a sisterly love or if it is of a more homoerotic nature. The text can be manipulated to support both views. More interesting than those well-covered views is the theory that love has both a “destroyer” and “redeemer” quality in this poem (Mahmoudi). It is Laura’s addiction (her love of the fruit) that leads to her near destruction, while it is Lizzie’s love that saves and redeems Laura.

This extreme emphasis on love can also be made into a statement of hate, because hate is the opposite of love and to understand love, we must know how to hate. The sisters must make the goblins their common enemy, so that their sisterhood can be the emphasis. Put differently, the sisters must hate the goblins, so that they can love each other. In reality, Lizzie would probably be angry at her sister for disobeying the common law and developing an addiction to the fruit.
Then, because of Laura’s foolhardy actions, Lizzie must be assaulted and possibly even raped, based on whatever critic’s view is supported. Women’s roles in this era would generally not support Lizzie taking such a powerful, male role. Lizzie, in some way, must hate her own sister for putting her into this position. That part is omitted from the poem, leaving the characters oddly two-dimensional in what would otherwise be an extremely dark and vivid poem.

The imagery in this poem is striking and creates its own kind of binary pair. The poem is so richly drawn and imaginative that it is almost as if Rossetti has painted a picture instead of penned a poem. This strange fairy tale is a complete contrast to reality. In fact, the moral of the poem would have been lost in this vivid tapestry of images, if it hadn’t had such an emphasis placed on it at the end of the poem. Imagine if the last line was “And light danced in her eyes” (541) instead of the epilogue like ending featuring the happy mothers with their children and the important moral of the story. The poem's tone would be different and the lesson wouldn't receive the emphasis, only the love of the sisters. This ending seems to be tacked on to justify the poem’s literary merits as a poem and not just a fairy tale. The reality of the poem is that the two girls must face temptation separately in order to receive their happy ending.

The poem’s function as a painting also serves to allow the reader the ability to be separated from the text, so that some of the more bizarre features won't be as far fetched. For example, the fact that there are goblins wondering around selling fruit to British maidens can be overlooked, while the reader still absorbs the message of sisterhood. This narrative strategy can also be looked at as an attempt to shield readers from the harsher edges of reality. The goblins may be men that sell addictive drugs to good girls who later suffer for their naiveté. In this world, that is fine, because it is a poem and it is a vivid painting like poem, so the reader doesn't have to fully realize the horror of the situation that these girls faced.

When imagining one scene from this poem painting, it would be extremely hard to overlook the role of the fruit, which is a dynamic part of the plot. It seems as if Rossetti meant the fruit to act as a main character. In this painting, the fruit would dominate the foreground, while the goblin brotherhood and sisterhood of women fall to the
background, because such an emphasis is given to the qualities of the fruit. They are listed as:

Apples and quinces,
Lemons and oranges,
Plump, unpeck’d cherries,
Melons and raspberries,
Bloom-down-cheek’d peaches,
Swart-headed mulberries,
Wild free-born cranberries,
Crab-apples, dewberries,
Pine-apples, blackberries,
Apricots, strawberries (5-14)

This is one of the lists and several additional types of fruit and varied descriptions are added in other places throughout. This listing element of the poem is common, as is seen with the list of goblins and their features. This creates a pairing of the goblins with the fruit, as if to make a statement that you can’t have one without the other.

The fruit itself makes an interesting binary pair. The fruit is “lus-cious” (61) and “sweet to tongue and sound to eye” (30), but causes the consumer to fade away and die. When Lizzie goes to save Laura, the only way she knows how, she pauses and

Long’d to buy fruit to comfort her,
but fear’d to pay too dear.
She thought of Jeanie in her grave,
Who should have been a bride;
But who for joys brides hope to have
Fell sick and died
In her gay prime,
In earliest winter time. (309-316)

The consumer commits suicide in eating the fruit, and Jeanie exists in this story solely to illustrate this.

The fruit is not even instant death, but a slow, dwindling decay that seems to continue beyond the grave, because “no grass will grow”
on Jeanie's grave. The ripeness of the fruit seems then to transcend all boundaries that fruit is normally given to become something akin to a contagious disease, even more than an addiction as some critics suggest. All who have contact with the fruit must suffer in some way. The goblins then are cast in the light as foreigners because their fruit comes from many different places as is suggested by the list of fruit the reader is given by Rossetti. Jeanie is the first to contract this “disease” through her contact with the goblins and their wares. Laura and Lizzie come into contact with the foreigners through Lizzie’s knowledge of Jeanie's fate. This is only a precursor to Laura’s downfall. The contagion of the fruit is a tidal wave that washes over all who lie in its path.

Laura falls ill by her seeking out the goblins and eating the fruit. Lizzie must help her sister heal from the disease by facing the contagion herself. Lizzie can survive, only because she is aided and inoculated by her love for her sister and also that she doesn't allow a piece of herself to be taken by the goblins, unlike Laura, who gives up a lock of the hair and a tear. Lizzie then can transform the fruit's juices into an antidote to cure Laura. Both sisters must then also warn their children against the fruit by telling them this tale, so that they will not come into contact with the disease.

The fruit's role as a disease furthers the binary aspect. Fruit is normally touted as healthy, but in this role it becomes its own opposite. The binary opposite of the fruit being both ripe and a source of decay is furthered by the other binary opposites that always seem to surround it in the text. The binaries are: night vs. day, light vs. dark, summer vs. winter, and life vs. death. The fact that these are some of the most elemental of binary opposites serves to further emphasize the fruit's binary elements of ripe and decay as an element of those other binaries. The goblins are always mentioned in conjunction with their fruit and the goblins are always mentioned at either evening or morning. “Maids heard the goblins cry” (2) only during “morning and evening”(1) never in the afternoon or the middle of the night. Morning and evening serve as the transitional time between night and day, so that the reader gets the sense that the edges of this world are blurred from reality to fantasy, much as the poem itself functions, as does the ripeness and decaying aspects of the fruit.
Light vs. dark is also a theme constructed around the fruit's binary elements. The barberries are “bright-fire-like” (27) and the pears are “red with basking/ out in the sun” (357-8). These light elements typify the fruits while hiding the fruit’s dark quality: disease. The light vs. dark binary also filters into Lizzie and the goblins. Lizzie is “like a lily in a flood” (408), “like a beacon left alone/in a hoary roaring sea,/ sending up a golden fire” (411-3), and “white with blossoms honey-sweet” (415). All of those descriptions are applied to Lizzie while she is being assaulted. This light turns to dark as they “scratch'd her, pinch'd her black as ink” (426). The goblins are the dark part of this equation. The overwhelming sense of light that is an inherent quality of Lizzie adds an extra dimension of darkness to the goblins that would otherwise not be quite as present in the poem without those descriptions and furthers the hero vs. villain binary again.

Summer and winter are also a binary theme. After the first list of fruits it is mentioned that they are “all ripe together/ in summer weather” (15-6). The fruit is only ripe in summer; in winter, they will be decaying. Summer and winter also work to promote the theme of life and death. Summer and Lizzie are life, winter and fruit are death. “Goblin Market” offers the reader a chance to imagine all kinds of possibilities within the text. One of the most interesting elements of the poem is the inherent binary oppositions of the poem which serve to unify the work, as each pairing furthers the theme of sisterhood, love, and the strength that is gained from that devotion. Whatever approach, the sisterhood theme is preeminent, which may be what Rossetti wanted readers to feel the most.

WORKS CITED


