

**Denise Rodriguez**  
*New York University*

**“Of Sugar-Baited Words”: A Linguistic Analysis of Christina  
Rossetti’s *Goblin Market***

Critical studies in literature often fail to assess how authors linguistically develop and reinforce a sense of character in their work. Yet, by examining how characters and their actions are syntactically, semantically, and phonetically encoded, an analysis of linguistic patterns leads to a fuller understanding of a literary text. For instance, we can ask ourselves how a statement functions based on the individual words that comprise it, why an author chooses certain words over others, or even whether or not the structure of a sentence has mimetic resonance in relation to its meaning. Such questions may be particularly relevant in the area of poetry, where the economy of a work often hinders full character description and where language generally plays a more complicated role; consider Bakhtin’s claim that “Poetry is language differently ordered or arranged” (133)

By examining the first section of Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*, the part of the poem leading up to Laura’s initial tasting of the fruit, I will illustrate how a linguistic analysis bridges the gap between language and the reader’s overall interpretation of characters and their roles. In *Goblin Market*, characters are developed particularly in terms of how they speak to one another. The activity of the poem centers on a series of directives, with each character’s statement representing his or her own place in a power-struggle. The way the goblins express themselves differs vastly from the way the sisters speak. Thus, while there are only a few vague descriptions of what the goblins or sisters actually look like, they emerge as fully-developed characters through their linguistic

endeavors. Simultaneously, outside of the sections of dialogue, Rossetti stylistically achieves a sense of character by reinforcing meaning through sound pattern and word choice.

The poem opens with the first of a series of imperatives, which helps build a dialogic framework and determine the relationship of characters throughout the poem. In an effort to entice the girls, the goblins cry “Come buy our orchard fruits, / Come buy, come buy” (3-4). Imperatives always have a world-to-word relationship, meaning they represent the speaker’s desire or the world, not as it is, but as it should be according to the speaker. Imperatives therefore have “compliance conditions” (Akmajian 238). The goblins’ initial statement functions as an effort to impose their will on the girls, and it thereby sets up the main tension of the poem, a dialectical force of good versus evil, innocence versus experience, and family and home versus the unknown. This last point of conflict is linguistically embedded in the context of the refrain, since “Come buy” can mean either to come purchase or, by homophonic relation, to come by--as in to *come over*. The play on *buy/by* adds to the tantalizing quality of the goblins’ call, especially since both related acts require the girls transgress the boundaries separating the safety of home from the dark, sexually suggestive world of the goblin men.

The goblins’ repeated call could also be read either as a request or, considering the statement’s terse quality, as a command. For the sisters and reader alike, the question thus becomes one of communicative intention, of determining what the speakers say in relation to how they expect their statement to be interpreted. As Wittgenstein argues, the meaning of an utterance depends on its function in a given context: “Don’t look for the meaning, look for the use” (in Lyons 32). In the case of the goblins’ cry, the

communicative intention remains somewhat ambiguously coded. Linguistic communication relies on speakers and hearers sharing an understanding of a given utterance and, therefore, on a clear sense of the speaker's communicative goals. However, In *Goblin Market*, the goblins' intentions remain purposefully vague.

Rossetti does not choose an explicit performative, as in "I hereby order you to come buy" or "I hereby request that you come buy." In fact, the goblins (speakers) are completely absent from their statement, while the girls (addressees) are only tacitly understood to be the subject of the predicate (i.e., "*You* come buy"). The girls become the potentially active instigators of the predicate, while the goblins exist as a collective, disembodied voice. At this early point in the poem, not only are the goblin men heard but never seen, they are absent from their own statement as well. This linguistically emphasized invisibility adds to what makes them mysterious and ultimately alluring.

*Goblin Market* functions outside the realm of reality and plays with the slippery boundaries separating the tangible from the arcane. Looking at the goblins' cry in terms of deixis or at the way the statement "is anchored to some essential point in context" further reveals how Rossetti achieves this elusive quality in her poem (Frawley 275). Deixis functions on three distinct levels, personal (the speaker and the listener), temporal (when the statement is being uttered) and spatial (where it is being said). The purpose is to establish the pertinent relationship between the participants, time, and location of a sentence to the meaning of the statement itself or simply to provide a contextual framework for a given utterance.

The issue of personal deixis has already been discussed, and, from this analysis, we see that, because the speaker is completely absent from the context of the statement, and

the hearer is only understood to be the subject (second person personal pronoun, “you”), no concrete character holds the statement in place. In terms of temporal deixis, the reader only knows that the goblins’ cry can be heard in the morning and evening, as stated in the first line. In any case, the temporality of all works of literature remains a difficult issue to address, since statements function as part of a text and the specific moment of the utterance as part of a symbolic order removed from a clear notion of time. Lastly, in relation to spatial deixis, no adverbs of place appear in the utterance to mark a sense of location, as in “Come *here* and buy” or “Go *there* and buy.” This final form of deixis plays a particularly complicated role in the refrain, especially if one chooses to consider the possibility of “Come by”--since nothing suggests where the girls should go to find the goblins.

This lack of anchorage, personal, temporal, and spatial, adds to the cryptic quality of the goblins’ call. Meaning depends on context, and, in this instance, nothing grounds the imperative within the parameters of reality. A related feeling of stillness or suspension is also encoded in the cry. After all, who or what functions as an agent? Since the girls stand in subject position, they are the agents but only potentially--because the statement has a future concentration. In terms of deontic modality, which has to do with the way a hypothetical world forces itself onto a reference world, an event expressed in an imperative always points to the future, away from the reference world and toward the desired condition expressed by the command or request (See Frawley 419-428). In the case of Lizzie and Laura, the problematics of agency, the dangers of fulfilling a desire or wish, are revealed in the goblins’ cry. While the act of tasting the fruit may seem to

represent freedom, autonomy, and an embracing of sexuality, it can also potentially lead to the sisters' victimization at the hands of the goblin men.

This sense of being caught between the safety of home and sisterly love and the goblin's alluring world is dramatized in the list of tempting fruit that follows the goblins' initial call. The list creates a linguistic space in which everything remains suspended, a gap that stands between the first part of the cry, the goblins' call to action, and Laura's plea ("Lie close"), the call to refuse action that proceeds it (41). Individual kinds of fruit in the list--apples, quinces, lemons, etc--reemphasize the more general concept of fruit, since the formers are hyponyms of the latter. John Lyons defines hyponymy as a relationship between "pairs of expressions of which the former is a hyponym of the latter [...] or of which the sense of the former includes that of the latter" (92). The series thereby heightens the desirability of the fruit by mediating between the unbounded and bounded notions of fruit, between fruit as a concept and the individual delicacies the goblins try to lure the girls into purchasing.

The list itself consists of nouns, their modifiers, the coordinating conjunction "and" (which appears eleven times), and only six verbs ("ripe," "pass," "fly," "taste," "try," and "fill"). The first verb ("ripe") appears nine lines into the list and follows the nondistributive quantifier "all," which refers to the fruit. This is the first of three intransitive verbs relating either directly or indirectly to the fruit:

All *ripe* together

In summer weather,--

Morns that *pass* by,

Fair eves that *fly* (15-18, my emphasis).

The prepositional phrase (line 16) functions as a weak transition out of the inventory of fruits and into a description of the fruit's ripening, marked by the intransitive verbs "ripe," "pass," and "fly." Since the verbs are intransitive, they do not suggest direct action, which reinforces the static quality of this section.

Both "Morns that pass by" and "Fair eves that fly" modify "In summer weather." However, this connection remains unclear, since the prepositional phrase itself modifies "all ripe together." What we have is a series of weakly related modifying clauses that could read as follows: "All ripe together in summer weather, in morns that pass by and (in) fair eves that fly." The lines are semigramatical and require reanalysis. However, even before the reader can disambiguate the statement, the refrain appears (line 19), with only an external juncture, a semicolon, to stand between it and the seductive list.

The inventory of fruits continues, following the refrain, and is again interrupted by the appearance of two transitive verbs in the line "Taste them and try" (25). Again, the subject or potential agent is only assumed to be the "you" the goblin men call to from a distance. One must also note the fact that the transitive verbs in the list are directly related to the girls' potential fall into temptation (like "buy" in the refrain). The coordinating conjunction in the imperative serves a somewhat unconventional or semigramatical purpose, since it does not connect two different elements in the sentence. On the contrary, "taste" and "try" are closely synonymous and, combined in this way, appear somewhat redundant. The use of "and" in this particular line differs from its function in the preceding lines, where it appears sporadically between items in the list and marks the movement from one type of fruit to another. Rossetti confuses the reader by both using the coordinating conjunction in a deviant way, to connect two words that

mean the same thing, and in its more standard form, to connect a series of different but grammatically equal elements.

The final verb in the list appears in an infinitive phrase modifying fruit: “Figs to fill your mouth” (28). In this line, the fricative /f/ in both “figs” and “fill” along with nasal /m/ in “mouth” contribute to the sense of having one’s mouth stuffed with fruit.

Fricatives are produced when “the airflow is forced through a narrow opening in the vocal tract” (Akmajian 69). The bilabial nasal in “mouth” is “produced with a complete obstruction of the oral cavity” (Akmajian 71). These are examples of phonetically reinforced meaning, where sound patterns mimic the essence of an utterance. Perhaps a more obvious instance of phonetic mimeses occurs in the final sound of most fruits in the list, the /s/, a voiceless alveolar fricative (i.e., “apples,” “quinces,” “lemons,” “oranges,” etc). This sound is created when air passes between the tip of the tongue and the alveolar ridge, which hits against the teeth and produces a snake-like hiss. Considering Rossetti’s symbolic use of fruit and metaphorical recreation of Eve’s fall in the Garden of Eden, this sound echoes temptation and establishes an alluring connection between the initial call, “Come buy,” and the inventory of fruit that directly proceeds it.

The list also raises questions in terms of the occasional use of noun modifiers that appear throughout. It must be determined whether the modifiers are restrictive or nonrestrictive. As Edmund Epstein notes, “Nonrestrictive adjectives are very common in poetry and not very common out of it” (Epstein 145). However, considering the position of the fruit in the poem, I would argue that these descriptions serve a restrictive purpose. Take, for instance, the precedent noun modifiers in the following lines: Bloom-down-cheeked peaches, / Swart-headed mulberries, / Wild free-born cranberries (9-11). The

modifiers restrict the meaning of the noun, by functioning as epithets that not only *describe* but also *define* the fruit. Restrictive modifiers hold an essential position in relation to the nouns they modify. Since the fruit in the poem is magical, the fact that the cranberries, for instance, are “wild and free-born” helps define what exactly differentiates them from all other fruit.

The list of fruit ends with a description of “Citrons from the South,” which are “Sweet to tongue and sound to eye” (29-30). Here lexical ambiguity results from the process of priming, where the meaning of a given word alternates due to one or more words of the same semantic field standing in relation to it (See Akmajian 435-436). In other words, “sound,” as it is used in this line, means appealing; however, because of “tongue” (related to taste) and “eye” (related to sight), the other interpretation of “sound” (related to hearing) superimposes itself onto the word’s more usual meaning within the context of the line. The words are also homonyms, different words with the same form. This second meaning of “sound” plays a salient role in the poem, especially since the girls generally only hear the goblin men, and since the refrain, like the goblin’s fruit (“sound to eye”), is meant to entice them. The line also foreshadows the moment when the goblins actually appear--another move from sound (auditory) to sound (visual).

Furthermore “eye” can function as either a noun or verb--as in *to look*. This second possibility only hints at a sense of activity or agency, since “eye” (as a noun) is the more obvious reading, particularly in relation to “tongue.” The fact that “to eye” is ambiguously coded works in relation to the theme of voyeurism in the poem. The act of looking, like that of hearing, foreshadows the actual tasting of the fruit.



Both listening and ultimately looking function as subversive actions that determine Lizzie and Laura's role in relation to the goblins. Laura's cry further illustrates this point: "We must not look at goblin men" (43). In this statement, the verb phrase consists of a negative verb ("not look") followed by the modal auxiliary "must" and serves to counteract the goblins' alluring call; while the presence of the subjective case pronoun "We" stands in contrast to the elusive subject position the girls hold in the goblins' refrain.

Immediately after the list of fruit and the goblins' refrain that follows it, the girls are described as follows:

Crouching close together  
 In the cooling weather,  
 With clasping arms and cautioning lips,  
 With tingling cheeks and finger tips (37-40).

The progressive "crouching" suggests an action that continues or is ongoing. Similarly, the inchoative "cooling" refers to an action that unfolds, one not completed within the context of the statement. The progressive participles "clasping," "cautioning," and "tingling" are all nonfinite verbs or verbals that function as modifiers and again emphasize a sense of incompleteness. These lines thus represent a moment of transition, marked by the progressive, an inchoative, and the verbal modifiers, and they illustrate the girls' precarious position between innocence and temptation.

In this transition, the girls move, at least momentarily, away from the goblins and their persistent call--by way of an overt rejection encoded in Laura's exclamative, "Lie close" (41). In this instance, the word close implies "near," its most obvious semantic

meaning, but also “clos(ed),” by way of a near homophone with the addition of the suffix “ed,” as in closed off from the tempting world of the goblin men. Laura continues her warning:

“We must not look at goblin men,  
 We must not buy their fruits:  
 Who knows upon what soil they fed  
 Their hungry thirsty roots?” (43-46).

The first two lines are related by entailment, since the first proposition leads directly into the second because the truth of the latter depends on that of the former. The following two lines make up a rhetorical question and are part of a garden path statement. The first line initially leads the reader to believe the question focuses on what soil the goblins themselves fed upon. The second line then shifts attention away from the goblins, by reintroducing the fruit (“Their hungry thirsty roots”). The linguistically reinforced confusion that arises serves to emphasize the inherent connection between the goblins and their fruit. Additionally, it mimics the sisters’ sense of anxiety and bewilderment.

The goblins’ call resurfaces in the poem immediately following the rhetorical question: “Come buy,” Call the goblins / Hobbling down the glen (47-48). The lines are slightly inverted; traditionally the subject precedes its predicate. In other words, the lines should read: “The goblins, hobbling down the glen, call ‘come buy’” or, without the extraposition of the modifying clause, “The goblins call ‘come buy,’ hobbling (or “as they hobble”) down the glen.” However, the inversion reflects the way the action unfolds in the poem. The cries are heard before the goblins appear. Again, they seem to conceal themselves behind their own evasive words, just as they hide in the dark landscape.

This elusiveness is further encoded by way of the absence of sequence markers here and throughout the poem. The poem moves directly from a rhetorical question into the resonating cry, with only an external juncture between them. This unexpected change in state and voice suggests that the goblins, via their call, can appear and disappear without warning. Words like “suddenly” or “and then,” for instance, often illustrate an abrupt shift from one place or condition to another. Without such a transition marker, the reader is even more startled by the dramatic change of state. The poem moves directly from a convoluted question, into the goblins’ refrain, and then back into Laura and Lizzie’s conversation--marked by the vocative “oh,” which stands in place of a sequence marker (49).

The shift out of the goblins’ refrain is further punctuated by the introduction of a singular term, the proper name “Laura” (49). The personal pronoun “you,” which functions as the implied subject in the refrain, appears following the proper name and emphasizes a sense of specificity lacking in the goblins’ call. However, regardless of its directness, the statement presents a problem, specifically in that it illustrates a move from the modal auxiliary “must,” in Laura’s “must not look at goblin men,” to the less emphatic “should,” in Lizzie’s statement (43, 50). This semantic shift opens the possibility that either sister may fall into temptation, and, thus, it subtly foreshadows the events of the poem.

Immediately following this imperative, Laura invites Lizzie to look: “Look, Lizzie, Look, Lizzie, / Down the glen tramp little men” (55-56). Here again, inversion suggests the order in which events transpire. First, the girls see the glen, and then the men appear. More important, the lines mimic a thematic inversion or turn, since they stand in direct

contrast to Laura's negatively encoded statement, "We must not look at goblin men," which appears earlier in the poem. In other words, the imperative transforms Laura's original assertion from admonishment to invitation. Laura continues to tempt Lizzie:

"How fair the vine must grow  
Whose grapes are so luscious,  
How warm the wind must blow  
Through those fruit bushes" (61-64).

The two-part rhetorical question, introduced by the wh term "how," stands in contrast and functions as a counterpoint to Laura's other question posed earlier in the poem, since the lines suggest a movement toward the goblins and their fruit.

Rhetorical questions stand apart from standard interrogatives in that they do not appeal to the *answerhood condition* (Akmajian 238). Furthermore, Laura seems to be already familiar with the fruit; after all, her queries are complex, tertiary questions functioning, not as interrogatives, but as exclamatives (see Epstein 1981, 188). There are at least two sets of questions that should logically precede the ones Laura poses:

- Q. Does the vine grow?
- A. Yes.
- Q. How does the vine grow?
- A. The vine grows (or *must* grow) fair.
- Q. How fair does (or *must*) the vine grow?

A similar chart can be made for the second part of her question. The information she seeks merely relates to degrees and, therefore, already illustrates an understanding, however limited, of the fruit's blossoming process. Laura does not ask *how* the vine

grows; after all, she knows it grows “fair.” Nor does she ask *how* the wind blows, since she knows it blows “warm.” Incidentally, this last part illustrates the quasi-predicative form, since “warm” functions as an adjective modifying “wind.” The semigrammatical thrust in the statement causes the reader to hesitate. Traditionally, the sentence would contain an adverb of manner to modify “blow,” as in “the wind blows *warmly* through those fruit bushes.”

Ultimately, what connects Laura to the goblins is an inherent similarity in speech patterns that surfaces at the critical point when Laura invites her sister to look at the goblin men. In tempting her sister, Laura lists what the goblins look like:

One hauls a basket,  
 One bears a plate,  
 One lugs a golden dish  
 Of many pounds weight” (57-60).

Similarly, in tempting the girls to taste, the goblins go through their elaborate list of fruits. Both lists are punctuated by external junctures, commas at the end of each line, and focus on individual members of a specific group (goblins-fruits, Laura-goblins). Laura’s imperative mimics and indirectly reinforces the goblins’ cry, which in turn emphasizes her movement away from Lizzie.

This moment of abandonment and differentiation plays a pivotal role, especially considering how likeness between the sisters is both thematically and linguistically reinforced throughout the poem. The similarity in the sisters’ names, for instance, allows the reader to confuse which sister says and does what. Yet the concept of similarity and

the dangers of differentiation are best illustrated in the section of the poem following Laura's return home after tasting the goblins' fruit for the first time:

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 [...] (195-98).

The word "like" does not merely function as a simile marker, connecting the girls to images of purity (blossoms, snow, ivory); more important, it stresses a sense of enforced *likeness* between the sisters, one emphasized through repetition. "Like" functions as [a]like, with which it shares the same root word.

It is, therefore, not surprising that Lizzie interrupts Laura's request to look at the goblins when they first appear down the glen. Lizzie counters her sister's bold statement with an exclamative "No," repeated four times in a single line (65). Her statement differs from Laura's in its terseness and simplicity; compare the free flowing quality of Laura's seductive question to Lizzie's succinct reply. The dramatic contrast again results from the lack of sequence markers, since the poem shifts directly out of the rhetorical question and into Lizzie's reply. While the rhetorical question creates a static space in the poem, Lizzie's retort has an active thrust that results from the repetition of a single word. Bakhtin argues that "each rejoinder, regardless of how brief and abrupt, has a specific quality of completion that expresses a particular position [...]" (72). In this instance, completion is actually made evident through the abruptness of Lizzie's response.

However, the force of her statement weakens considerably in the following two lines:

"Their offers should not charm us, / Their evil gifts would harm us" (66-67). The modal

auxiliaries “should” and “would” are less assertive than Lizzie's original “must” earlier in the poem. The reader thus moves from a sense of certainty, encoded in the word “must,” towards a greater degree of possibility--created by this semantic opening in the poem.

In *Goblin Market*, the qualities and meanings of characters are stylistically molded into the thematic contours of the poem. An analysis of linguistic structure helps the reader chart Laura's dramatic movement away from the bonds of sisterly love towards the potentially dangerous world of the goblins. The series of imperatives that constitute the major dialogic framework in this first section of the poem determines the position of characters. Throughout the section, the goblins are described as “other,” while their idiosyncratic speech pattern and the elusive quality of their words further define them as such. Similarly, the sisters' imperatives shift in meaning, from emphatic rejection of the goblins to a less assertive denouncement, and, in Laura's case, to an overt invitation to “look”--a pleasure closely related to tasting and thus with finally succumbing to the goblins' tantalizing call.

## Works Cited

- Akmajian, Adrian, et al. *Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and Communication*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995.
- Bakhtin, M. M.. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Trans Vern W. McGee. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.
- Epstein, Edmund. "Hopkins' 'Heaven-Haven': a Linguistic-Critical Description," *Essays in Criticism*, (April 1973), 137-145.
- "The Self-Reflective Artifact: an Approach to a Theory of Value in Literature," in *Essays in Modern Stylistics*, ed. Donald Freedman. London, New York: Methuen, 1981.
- Frawley William. *Linguistic Semantics*. Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1992.
- Lyons, John. *Language, Meaning and Context*. Suffolk: The Chaucer Press, 1981.
- Rossetti, Christina. *Goblin Market*. 1893. Reprint edition. New York: Dover Publications, 1983.