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Symbolic Seasons: Moving through the monomyth cycle with “Goblin Market”

One of the most familiar symbols of change for humans is the seasons. Each season can represent many different changes, from a change in weather to a change in mood. The seasons have also come to represent the ups and downs that a person can face in their life. This is the idea behind Northrop Frye’s monomyth archetype. The monomyth sets the seasons in a circle, each season corresponds with a different phase, and each phase represents a different step in human experiences (Bressler 152). In Christina Rossetti’s poem “Goblin Market,” the characters Laura and Lizzie journey through the phases of the monomyth as they face temptation and redemption. Setting and symbolism work together to present within the poem the four phases of the monomyth and to show that life’s journey is full of opposition, but also contains redemption.

The setting of the poem contrasts the calm, “summer”-like pastoral farm with the tempting, “winter”-like goblin market to show Laura and Lizzie’s journey. The girls’ home is a farm and they constantly surrounded by nature, as the “Wind sang them lullaby” (Rossetti 193), they work “Neat like bees” (201) and “milked the cows” (203). This pastoral setting represents the summer or romantic phase of the monomyth theory. This phase is where “all our wishes are fulfilled and [one] can achieve total happiness” (Bressler 152). The pastoral setting also represents “a safe, rural world, in that corruption, confusion and danger are placed elsewhere—in the city” (Sturrock 98). “The city” is represented by the winter, or anti-romantic phase. This phase “tells the story of bondage, imprisonment, frustration and fear” (Bressler 152). In this case, “the city” is the goblin market, where the girls are tempted to “Come buy, come buy”

(Rossetti 4), where the goblins are “Leering at each other” and where a girl will give a piece of herself, “Buy from us with a golden curl” (125) and enter into the bondage. Both Laura and Lizzie travel from their idyllic, safe summer setting and enter the bleak, corrupt winter setting. Both encounter the bondage and imprisonment associated with the market, and both experience the goblin market differently, as Laura’s experience dwells more in her temptation, and Lizzie’s experience is sacrificial.

Each phase of the monomyth also represents a phase of Laura and Lizzie’s experience with the goblin men. Although it is not the first stage in the monomyth, the actual start of their journey takes place during the fall phase. Just as autumn is the transition from the warmth and happiness of summer, to the cold depression of winter, the fall phase is known as the “fall from happiness and freedom to disaster” (Bressler 152). Laura’s choice to go to the goblin market and partake of the goblin fruit represents her entrance into the fall phase. It is assumed from the poem that Laura has been leading a happy life. She and her “sister” Lizzie work side by side each day, “Neat like bees, as sweet and busy” (Rossetti 201). She and Lizzie “crouch close together” (36) to keep each other safe from the goblin men’s call, as “Their evil gifts would harm us” (66). Laura has been living in the summer phase, which will be explained later, but although Laura might enjoy the happiness she feels with Lizzie in the summer phase, she cannot turn away from the temptation that the goblin men presents and she eventually “chose to linger” (69) and moves into the fall phase. The autumn months represent a time of decay, the leaves fall from the trees in preparation for the winter months. Laura’s happiness falls and disintegrates when she follows the goblin’s call. As Laura sells her hair to buy the goblin’s fruit, she is selling a piece of herself. Her realization of the price she pays, “She dropped a tear more rare than pearl” (127), shows how she moves deeper into the fall phase. She leaves behind happiness and accepts the loss of

freedom, as she “sucked their fruit globes” (128). Laura’s completion of the fall phase occurs when she realizes she can no longer hear the goblin men and is denied their fruit. All the leaves have fallen from the tree in preparation for winter; Laura’s “passionate yearning/...for baulked desire” (266-267) represents her completely fallen state, and her ascension into winter.

The depression and hopelessness that is felt when denied the goblin fruit is representative of the winter, or the anti-romantic phase of the mono-myth. Laura’s constant, “passionate yearning” (Rossetti 266) is a form of bondage, as she is no longer able to live her life as she had before. Laura’s life becomes cold, barren and “listless,” just as the landscape does during the winter months. Just as the landscape changes during the winter from the red and browns of fall to complete blank whiteness, Laura’s appearance changes. The “golden curl” (125) of her hair “grew thin and gray” (277), and she “dwindled.../ To swift decay and burn/ Her fire away” (278, 279-80). Laura has already journeyed far from where she started in the beginning in the story, but she isn’t the only girl to go through the winter phase. Jeanie, a girl who lived in the same village as Laura and Lizzie, was also tempted by the goblin’s fruit. Lizzie remembers Jeanie as one “Who should have been a bride” (313), but the temptation caused her to become “sick and died/...In earliest Winter time/With the glazing rime, With the first snow-fall of crisp Winter time” (310). The text of the poem even suggests that once a girl has fallen for the goblin’s temptation, they have entered a state of frustration and hopelessness, or the anti-romantic phase. It was too late for Jeanie to be pulled out of her winter, but for Laura, it will take help from her sister to move through the next two phases of the mono-myth.

Lizzie’s sacrifice to the goblins helps Laura leave the winter phase behind and gain redemption within the spring phase. The spring phase “relates the story of [the] rise from anti-romance and frustration to freedom and happiness” (Bressler 152). Lizzie notices Laura’s

struggle in the winter phase. She watches “her sister’s cankerous care” (Rossetti 300) and “longs to buy fruit to comfort [Laura]” (310). Lizzie’s sacrifice to the goblins is her movement through the winter phase, as “For the first time in her life/[She] began to listen and look” (327-28). Her bondage comes as the goblins “Coaxed and fought her/Bullied and besought her” (425-26). Compared to Laura’s winter phase, Lizzie’s is significantly shorter. She doesn’t fall for the goblin’s temptation, she “would not open lip from lip/ Lest they should cram a mouthful in” (431-32) and provides her with an easier passage through the winter phase than Laura’s. The goblin’s lift their hold on her, and she “went her way” (448) into the spring phase. She goes to Laura and provides a way for her to enter the spring phase as well. She offers to Laura, “Eat me, drink me, love me” (471) as she is covered in the goblin’s fruit juice. The juice becomes a medicine for Laura, “Her lips began to scorch/That juice was wormwood to her tongue” (493-94), and she finds “Life out of death” (524), just as new life begins as winter ends. Through Lizzie’s sacrifice, Laura has successfully transitioned through the winter phase, into the spring phase, and is ready to enter the final phase: summer.

Just as the summer or romantic phase represents the phase where “wishes are fulfilled” and where “total happiness” is achieved (Bressler 152), Laura and Lizzie’s lives end happily after their experiences with the goblin men. The girls are described as “wives/With children of their own” (544-45). Leaving the summer phase they lived in the beginning of the poem and traveling through the monomyth cycle has provided them with the experience they need in order to know happiness.

“If one is to achieve spiritual redemption...the joys of earthly paradise must be renounced” (Packer 377). Laura and Lizzie find that redemption as they leave the summer phase of the mono-myth and journey through opposition of “bondage, imprisonment, frustration and

fear” (Bressler 152), even though it meant leaving their idyllic pastoral setting and entering the corrupt goblin market. The symbolism of the seasons cycle show that Laura and Lizzie had a complete oppositional experience, although differing from each other, but both were able to achieve the “total happiness” of redemption.

Works Cited

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