**A love less worth than apples**

**Following his exploration of Rossetti’s poem ‘Goblin Market’ in emagazine 49, Ray Cluley interprets her poem ‘An Apple Gathering’ as a cautionary tale.**

An Apple Gathering

I plucked pink blossoms from mine apple-tree
And wore them all that evening in my hair:
Then in due season when I went to see
I found no apples there.

With dangling basket all along the grass
As I had come I went the self-same track:
My neighbours mocked me while they saw me pass
So empty-handed back.

Lilian and Lilias smiled in trudging by,
Their heaped-up basket teazed me like a jeer;
Sweet-voiced they sang beneath the sunset sky,
Their mother’s home was near.

Plump Gertrude passed me with her basket full,
A stronger hand than hers helped it along;
A voice talked with her through the shadows cool
More sweet to me than song.

Ah Willie, Willie, was my love less worth
Than apples with their green leaves piled above?
I counted rosiest apples on the earth
Of far less worth than love.

So once it was with me you stooped to talk
Laughing and listening in this very lane;
To think that by this way we used to walk
We shall not walk again!

I let my neighbours pass me, ones and twos
And groups; the latest said the night grew chill,
And hastened: but I loitered; while the dews
Fell fast I loitered still.

Christina Rossetti

With its apples alluding to The Fall, the title ‘An Apple Gathering’ immediately presents the idea of temptation with its narrator as Eve, but we soon learn this is a poem about unrequited love that can be also be read as a warning against pre-marital sex. Maybe we should expect as much from Christina Rossetti, a very religious woman who spent some of her life working at Highgate Penitentiary for Fallen Women.

The narrator has our sympathy from the outset by way of first person perspective, but she’s a character we are to learn from, herself an example not to follow. ‘I plucked pink blossoms from mine apple-tree’ she tells us, and everything that follows is a result of this action. The plosive sounds of ‘plucked pink blossoms’ lends the line extra impact and may be seen to represent the sounds of kissing, especially as the poem develops into one with a focus on love. She has picked the blossoms too early in an effort to make herself more desirable, ‘wore them all that evening’, and as a result when she returns ‘in due season’ she finds ‘no apples there’.

Her disappointment is made clear in the ‘dangling basket all along the grass’ and we imagine her dragging it without enthusiasm, the basket as empty as she feels. Her neighbours ‘mocked me while they saw me pass’ and so it seems society has judged her for acting prematurely, an idea that develops in the third stanza; the ‘heaped-up basket’ of Lilian and Lilias contrasts with her own and it is personified, ‘teazed me like a jeer’, the simile revealing much about how the narrator feels. The role of women is emphasised by the fact that they travel to their ‘mother’s home’ and the girls recognise the narrator’s failings regarding what is expected of her gender for though they sing as they pass, the sibilance of ‘sweet-voiced they sang beneath the sunset sky’ has connotations of hissing or secretive laughter at her fate.

Passing after them ‘with her basket full’ is ‘plump Gertrude’. The adjective ‘plump’ is perhaps an insult revealing narrator’s jealousy, but the word also means rich, full, healthy, complete, suggesting that Gertrude is as full as her own basket, content in ways the narrator cannot be. ‘A stronger hand than hers’ helps Gertrude carry it, and ‘a voice’ talks with her’, making it progressively clear that the apple baskets are metaphors for satisfaction in love. She is with a man, yet his actions are disassociated from him; he is ‘a stronger hand’ and ‘a voice’ only. Maybe these disembodied aspects have a more spiritual significance, representing instead the hand and voice of God. The distance suggested in being only a hand and voice suggests he is perhaps unknown to the narrator, just as all men will be thanks to her haste in plucking the blossoms, or it may be that she purposefully ignores his identity because he was once known to her. Considering the simile regarding his voice, ‘more sweet to me than song’, the latter reading seems a particularly valid one, especially as it is followed so quickly by ‘Ah Willie, Willie’ as the opening of the next stanza.

Whether he is the new love of Gertrude, or she is simply reminded of him by the strong hand and voice, the lamenting sigh and repetition of ‘Ah Willie, Willie’ suggests this man is very important to the narrator (and according to the OED it’s not too early for Willie to have phallic connotations, so the sexual reading of the poem is maintained). However, Rossetti uses a variety of techniques to show that whatever relationship they once had is now over. The closeness of ‘love’ and ‘less’, together with the fast pace of a monosyllabic sequence, makes it difficult to read them without stringing them together as ‘loveless’. As a result we read the narrator as being of loveless worth to Willie and the enjambment encourages this. That Rossetti want us to read it as such is illustrated by the clearer syntactical arrangement of ‘less worth than love’ of the final line, highlighting the previous arrangement as a deliberately suggestive use of language and emphasising it with repetition.

Our sympathy for the narrator is brought to the fore with the rhetorical question ‘was my love less worth than apples’ as it shows a certain naivety in her actions, and our sympathy develops with the next stanza as she reminisces ‘so once it was you stooped to talk’. However, the ‘once’ may be more than a past tense indicator that she is being retrospective; it may be the number of times Willie stooped to talk with her, that once he had enjoyed her company he moved on to another with literally more fruits to offer. He does not value her company now that she has nothing for him. We see how important this time was to her with the alliterative ‘laughing and listening in this very lane’, whilst the exclamatory ‘We shall not walk again!’ that concludes the stanza drives home the impact such a loss has had upon her, marking the finality of their parting.

Her dejected and rejected frame of mind comes across most fully in the final stanza of the poem as she passively allows her neighbours to pass her by. It reveals an awareness on her part, a realisation that she has been too hasty and now others pass her in pursuit of love and companionship, as if the poem is a retelling of the hare and the tortoise fable. The enjambment as they pass in ‘ones and twos and groups’ emphasises the continuing procession of people, which in turn emphasises her isolation and we pity her, particularly as ‘the night grew chill’, pathetic fallacy indicating how the external world reflects her internal one; loveless, she feels cold and dark. That she ‘loitered’ suggests an aimless, perhaps hopeless, waiting for someone never to come, and it is repeated effectively to show how much time passes in such a way. Indeed, she loitered ‘while the dews fell fast’ indicating she remained well through the night, desperate and desolate, the falling dew another example of pathetic fallacy in which the dew is a metaphor for her tears.

In picking the blossoms too early, the narrator forfeits her chance at apples. Or, in enjoying the physical beauty that the blossoms represent, an allusion to sex, she leaves herself bereft of the sustenance a married relationship can offer, represented by the apples that are gathered. Like ‘Goblin Market’, this is a poem that retells the Fall, a warning against temptation in which the premature plucking of apple blossom represents the loss of virginity; without the apples the blossoms would have developed into, the narrator has nothing with which to tempt men into a more sustaining relationship. The moral offered is to resist the temptation of immediate pleasures when patience can be more rewarding, at least according to the Victorian society in which Rossetti wrote. The narrator remains nameless, thus her fate applicable to all women – a fate suggesting that without men, women’s lives are as empty as her basket.
Or it could just be about picking apples.

**Ray Cluley.**

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