



School of History Assignment Cover Sheet

This coversheet should be completed and form the first page of all assignments.

ITS Username	CB21106		
Module Code:	HST5389	Module Title	ANGELS, SPINSTERS AND WHORES: BRITISH WOMEN AND GENDER FROM VICTORIA TO THE VOTE 2021/22
Seminar Teacher	Amanda Vickery		
Assignment name (e.g. 'Research Essay')	Source Analysis	Word Count:	1659
Title:	Analysis of "In the Round Tower at Jhansi, June 8, 1857" by Christina Rossetti		

What aspect of this submission would you most like feedback on?

This could be something you are trying particularly to improve, or want to develop for other assignments on this or other modules in the future.

If my claims are precise enough, and easy to follow, and how to improve my writing and argument.

I have a coversheet from the Disability and Dyslexia Service, and have submitted it alongside this assignment:

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Analysis of “In the Round Tower at Jhansi, June 8, 1857” by Christina Rossetti

Christina Rossetti’s poem “In the Round Tower at Jhansi, June 8, 1857” imagines the moments preceding the deaths of Captain Alexander Skene of the 68th Bengal Native Infantry, and his wife, Margaret in June during the Indian Rebellion of 1857¹, in which this married couple commits suicide rather than die at the hands of the insurgents. Rossetti first published this poem in the illustrated periodical *Once a Week* in 1859², and again as the second poem in her 1862 poetry collection *Goblin Market, and Other Poems*³. Although a distinct focus of this poem is the impact of the 1857 Indian Rebellion on British colonialists in India, this poem also addresses themes of religion, love, intimacy, death, and gender. These more subtle themes of this poem will be the focus of my analysis in recognizing the extent to which Christina Rossetti adheres to the heavily prescribed gender norms of her time⁴, as well as historians' perspectives on gender in the Victorian era. To understand the significance of this source, we must investigate the social climate of Rossetti’s upbringing and daily life, the colonial setting of her poem, and the context of her poem’s publication.

Christina Rossetti’s upbringing and family background helps inform one’s understanding of the degree to which the poem’s subjects conform to Victorian ideals. Rossetti was born in 1830 to an “extraordinarily gifted”⁵ Anglo-Italian family living in London, and enjoyed a happy upbringing “characterized by affectionate parental care.”

¹ Luca Hargitai, “Christina Rossetti Poetry Analysis (AS English Literature),” Blogspot, 29 October 2015, <http://rossettipoetryanalysis.blogspot.com/2015/11/in-round-tower-at-jhansi-by-christina.html>

² Caroline Rossetti, “THE ROUND TOWER AT JHANSI.--JUNE 8, 1857,” *Once a Week*, 13 Aug 1859, 1(7) (Aug 13, 1859): 140.

³ Christina Rossetti, *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, Cambridge: Macmillan&Co., 1862.

⁴ Susie Steinbach, “Gender,” in *Understanding the Victorians*, 166-167, accessed 11 November 2021, <https://qplus.qmul.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=17052§ion=3#maincontent>

⁵ “Christina Rossetti,” Poetry Foundation (Poetry Foundation), accessed 12 November 2021, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/christina-rossetti>.

and relative peace within the home.⁶ Rossetti's upbringing may help explain the harmony (and gender equality) between Mr. and Mrs. Skene which deviates from historian Susie Steinbach's view that generally a woman's "world was too often organised solely for the pleasure of men."⁷ This deviation is perhaps most clearly evidenced by Captain Skene's decision to shoot his wife before shooting himself, which may more broadly symbolize a "considerate husband attend[ing] to the satisfaction of his wife's needs before that of his own."⁸ Furthermore, the dialogue format between Skene and his wife can be viewed as non-adherent to the "separate spheres" perspective on gender, a discourse in which men and women occupied distinct and separate social roles.⁹ Virtually all dialogue within the poem is unattributed: the reader's understanding of the speaker's identity is thus shaped entirely by the extant gender stereotypes accessible to the reader. Although in the fourth stanza it is assumed that Skene's wife asks a question to which Captain Skene responds,¹⁰ this ambiguity creates room for imagination and further discourse on gender, seemingly mocking the defensibility of the incipient "separate spheres" ideology.

Religion is likewise a relevant aspect in this poem's analysis. Rossetti grew up in an Evangelical household, although she later adopted an Anglo-Catholic religious orientation.¹¹ Despite this shift (or perhaps due to this new religious attitude) religion

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Amanda Vickery, *Lecture 4 Sex and the Victorians*, slide 24, October 2021, <https://qmulplus.qmul.ac.uk/mod/kalvidres/view.php?id=1611546>.

⁸ Victoria Coulson. "Redemption and Representation in Goblin Market: Christina Rossetti and the Salvific Signifier." *Victorian Poetry* 55(4) (2017): 441, accessed 12 Nov 2021, doi:10.1353/vp.2017.0027.

⁹ Susie Steinbach, "Gender," in *Understanding the Victorians*, 168, accessed 12 November 2021, <https://qmulplus.qmul.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=17052§ion=3#maincontent>.

¹⁰ Dharmender Kumar, "In the Round Tower at Jhansi, June 8, 1857 by Christina Rossetti", Poem Analysis, 26 February 2021, <https://poemanalysis.com/christina-rossetti/in-the-round-tower-at-jhansi-june-8-1857/>.

¹¹ "Christina Rossetti," Poetry Foundation (Poetry Foundation), accessed 12 November 2021, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/christina-rossetti>.

remained an deep-rooted aspect of her identity,¹² often reflected in her works, including this poem in which Rossetti juxtapositions Skene and his wife's resolution to suicide with religious sin. The final line of the third stanza, "God forgive them this!" hints at the religious implications of suicide as sin. In addition to imparting tones of helplessness and invoking sympathy for this couple's fate, Rossetti engages in religious discourse to further comment on (and mock) Victorian gender roles and expectations. Her usage of the pronoun "them" paints both husband and wife as equally culpable parties in suicide, subverting traditional gender norms in which the decision likely would have fallen solely on the male. This religious reference also further upsets ideals of femininity in relation to Margaret by depicting her as sinful and therefore in discord with angelic associations of femininity and wifhood. According to M. Jeanne Peterson, the phrase "angel in the house" conveyed the socio-psychological profile of the idealized Victorian lady of which "[t]he married woman has to be the apotheosis"; "she obeyed her husband, adored him, and promoted his spiritual and physical well-being."¹³ On one hand, Margaret is portrayed as loyal, loving, and obedient to her husband to the extent of suicide. However, her obedience leads to sin and her actions condemn her to damnation, thus denying her any possible status of "angel": the nature of her religious transgression precludes innocence or piety. In this manner, Rossetti calls attention to the absurdity and near-impossibility of any true "angel in the house", a notion that is widely supported by historians today.¹⁴

¹²Mary Wilson Carpenter, "'Eat Me, Drink Me, Love Me': The Consumable Female Body in Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market,'" *Victorian Poetry* 29(4) (1991): 418, www.jstor.org/stable/40003006.

¹³ M. Jeanne Peterson, "No Angels in the House: The Victorian Myth and the Paget Women," *The American Historical Review* 89(3) (1984): 677-704, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1856121>.

¹⁴ Amanda Vickery, "Golden Age to Separate Spheres: A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History," *The Historical Journal* 36(2) (1993): 394, <https://qmul.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=17052§ion=3#maincontent>

Although themes of romance and desire are intrinsic to this poem, its publication in *Goblin Market, and Other Poems*, directly following “Goblin Market” adds a new dimension of meaning to its sexual undertones when analyzed in the context of Rossetti’s 1862 anthology. “Goblin Market” is one of Rossetti’s best known works, and conveys themes of desire similar to “In the Round Tower at Jhansi”.¹⁵ However, “In the Round Tower at Jhansi” contains “traces of the imperialist discourse missing from [‘Goblin Market’]”: whereas Lizzie, an individual in “Goblin Market” is consumed by a sibling, Margaret’s body is “constituted by its absolute difference from ‘The swarming howling wretches below’”; whereas Lizzie is “offered”; the insurgents are not invited.¹⁶ Rossetti takes a more sympathetic stance towards Skene and his wife; the tragedy of their deaths is somewhat lessened by the love that the couple shares: “[i]t is not pain [t]hus to kiss and die.” This sentiment is common among Victorians, who generally “were extremely sentimental—hence their love of melodrama, which was full of exaggerated and unproblematic declarations of love.”¹⁷ Yet “In the Round Tower at Jhansi” conflicts with the Victorian belief that “women should not, and more importantly did not, experience sexual desire,”¹⁸ for Margaret seems to desire her husband just as much as he desires her: before their deaths they exchange kisses that they both enjoy; they both ask for more. Margaret’s sexual desire is further illuminated in Coulson’s interpretation of this poem and its succession of “Goblin Market,” in which a “phallic structure” is similarly “beset by a ‘swarm’ of angry, aggressive, unindividuated creatures.” The lines “‘Is the time come?’—‘The time is come!’” further

¹⁵ Victoria Coulson, "Redemption and Representation in *Goblin Market*: Christina Rossetti and the Salvific Signifier," *Victorian Poetry* 55(4) (2017): 423-450, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/690593>.

¹⁶ Mary Wilson Carpenter, “‘Eat Me, Drink Me, Love Me’: The Consumable Female Body in Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market,’” *Victorian Poetry* 29(4) (1991): 430, www.jstor.org/stable/40003006

¹⁷ Susie Steinbach, “Sexuality,” in *Understanding the Victorians*, 242-243, accessed 12 November 2021, <https://qplus.qmul.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=17052§ion=5>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

play on the language of orgasm and Captain Skene's ability to satisfy Margaret.¹⁹ Moreover, orgasm is reflected in the imagery of a gun firing, as well as small explosions at the top of the "phallic structure" — in this interpretation their suicidal conclusion represents the "supreme consummation of their love;" orgasm is "a literally ultimate good, a supremely worthwhile consummation."²⁰

The details of Alexander and Margaret Skene's deaths are unclear, but it is more likely that they were killed than that they committed suicide.²¹ In 1875, Rossetti left a footnote acknowledging the poem's fictional basis. This acknowledgement further solidifies the imaginative nature of this poem: by existing outside of facts, the poem is better established as a site for social commentary, as opposed to purely nonfictional narrative. Upon a closer inspection of the poem one can better understand the purpose of the work: what Rossetti sought to convey, and her attitudes towards society. Rossetti uses the narrative within the poem to subtly upend traditional Victorian ideas on gender, and communicate her own opinions on sexuality, femininity, and relationships, which were largely atypical of her time and still somewhat deviant from historians' views on women in the Victorian era.

¹⁹ Victoria Coulson. "Redemption and Representation in *Goblin Market*: Christina Rossetti and the Salvific Signifier." *Victorian Poetry* 55(4) (2017): 441, accessed 12 Nov 2021

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Tim Kendall, "War Poetry," Blogspot, 8 December 2009, <http://war-poets.blogspot.com/2009/12/christina-rossetti-in-round-tower-at.html>.

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