The tradition of sisterhood provided a safe sphere for women to protect and reinforce their identities as models of virtue in the societal structure in Nineteen Century England. Through “sisterly” relationships of emotional and often physical love, such as the relationship between Lizzie and Laura in Christina Rossetti’s “the Goblin Market,” women were able to maintain a distance from the sphere of men and therefore sexual deviance. Women who were drawn into sexual relations with men, like Laura, could be redeemed under the guise of sisterhood and morality. Carroll Smith- Rosenberg, in her essay “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between women in the Nineteenth- Century America,” which examines the intensity of female relationships within this sphere of women, reinforces the nature of sisterhood as a protective and unifying measure, separate from the male-dominated sphere. The Goblin Market, as a nursery rhyme intended for children, a form of conditioning young girls to accept and be accepted in the tradition of sisterhood. Within the context of this definition, it is not a steamy erotic poem, designed to challenge the conceptions of sexuality during the time, but rather a method of preserving tradition and social norms between women’s relationships.

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg argues that the relationships between women of Nineteenth century America, while display characteristics of homosocial behavior we today view as socially deviant, were in fact widely accepted and expected of the time period. The dominant sphere of women encouraged the “love” and companionship between two friends. I will argue that the relationship of Lizzie and Laura fits well within these boundaries of normalcy defined by their contextual social spheres, without committing acts abnormal to the social structure of the time. “… rather than seeing a gulf between the normal and the abnormal we view sexual and emotional impulses as part of a continuum or spectrum of effect gradations strongly effected by cultural norms and arrangements, a continuum influenced in part by observed and thus learned behavior. At one end of the continuum lies committed heterosexuality, at the other uncompromising homosexuality; between, a wide latitude of emotions and sexual feelings…” (29).

The story of Jeanie, a side character within ‘Goblin Market,’ serves as a warning. Jeanie provides an example for Lizzie and Laura, almost as though she were a nursery story within a nursery story, the previous remnants of a cautionary tale for young girls against the dangers of the world. They are reminded of Jeanie, who was lured in by the fruits of the Goblins, and eventually died as a result of having eaten them. “’Good folk,” said Lizzie, / Mindful of Jeanie:” Lizzie, while dealing the Goblins, recalls the story of Jeanie as her ‘touchstone’ for moral conduct. While Lizzie is aware of the dangers made known to her by the story of Jeanie, she is implicated into a relationship with the Goblins in attempt to ‘redeem’ her sister, to free her sister of the desire that she has been plagued with. Only through sacrificing her own purity and innocence can she hope to save her sister. Similarly, only through sisterhood can Laura hope to be redeemed. Jeanie, however, without the support of sisterhood, without the strength of another relationship with her own gender, succumbs to the evils of desire, represented through the fruits of desire. The two sisters are intertwined; each one necessary for the other’s survival. Jeanie, in her own way, is necessary as a didactic teacher for both girls, a reminder of their own susceptibility to desire.

Rossetti’s solution to sexual inclination and desire is seen in the protection of sisterhood. By using sisterhood, women can be redeemed and retain their status as models of virtue. Similarly to this, the “homo-social” relationships between women of Nineteenth century American serve as support systems to preserve and protect the virtue of other women within similar social groups. In one instance that Smith-Rosenberg mentions, an entire gaggle of women assemble to ward of the unwelcome advances of a young man toward one of their own. Another didactive novel, called the Coquette, written in epistolary form during the eighteenth century as a series of corresponding letters between a young woman named Eliza Wharton and her surrounding social circles, portrays relationships of a similar use. Eliza is warned constantly by the women of her social sphere, including an elderly friend, a close peer and her own mother, about the dangers of engaging solely in pleasurable experiences with the sphere of men and not confining herself to the necessary engagements of young women. Like Jeanie, Eliza succumbs to desire and abandons the support of her sisterhood. She is henceforth regarded as a Coquette, socially deviant because she refuses to properly adhere to homo-social norms but to explore relationships with the opposite gender. Like Jeanie, her desire and solitary choices led her to be exiled. She dies alone, without the help of family or friends and literally impregnated in direct consequence to her actions. Like Jeanie, she serves as a “moral touchstone,” a sacrificial character designed to illustrate the dangers of desire and pleasure. These women are necessary as foils to the virtuousness of sisterhood and redemption.

“Afterward, when both were wives/ With children of their own’/ Their mother-hearts beset with fears,/Their lives bound up in tender lives;/ Laura would call the little ones/ and tell them of her early prime,/ Those pleasant days long gone/ Of not-returning time:/Would talk about the haunted glen,/The wicked, quaint fruit-merchant men,/ Their fruits like honey to the throat/ But poison in the blood; / (Men sell not such in any town: ) / Would tell them how her sister stood/ In deadly peril to do her good,” Laura, not Lizzie, tells her children of the evils of the Goblin Market. Laura becomes the new Jeanie, the new Eliza; however her tale ends differently. Through the power of the sisterhood, she perseveres. Only her sister stood in the way of “deadly peril” to recue Laura. For her children, she tells a tale to warn them of the dangers. Through her children and her tale, she, like Rossetti, continues the tradition of sisterhood. Sisterhood, not marriage or relationship with any man, becomes the ultimate virtue. Rossetti reconstructs the nursery rhyme that conditions woman to fear and detest desire without an outlet; instead she provides the solution for this desire through the social sphere of women. “Goblin Market” is not just any didactic nursery tale written to instruct youth into chastity but to teach understanding, redemption and fellowship: “Then joining hands to little hands/Would bid them cling together,/ “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.”