

Conveying the Female Death and The Lady of Shalott: A detailed case study of Browning's The Lady of Shalott.

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Abstract:

The aim and scope of this present paper is to define the notion of female identity in the web of Victorian society. Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" is highly vivifying the status of a girl- embodies the stylistic approach of the ideal beauty and of deep projection with the subtle veil of ignorance- who, by unknowingly or may knowingly, procreates the imaginary web around her, which is proved to be, at once, the misfortune to her life. Tennyson's Shalott even is not aware what curse is to be befallen on her, but may be able to understand, in her psychological stances, that an uncanny will be fallen on her at the point of time. Death is subjected very naturally through the entire work of "The Lady of Shalott" and Tennyson means to do that easily in a very difficult catastrophically way. "The Lady of Shalott" is the superb identification of Tennyson's canonical phenomenon of deep mourning. She is caught within the web but she shows her ability and courage to break through the proliferation of the earth, her artificial belonging. Her identity is shattered and she does not try revive her feelings from the context of female perspectives like that of a Victorian woman. But her resistance of her patience through a very long time was, by unexpectedly, broken and finally lead herself towards reality as a real being.

Key Words:

Claustrophobic projection in the web, canonical phenomenon of deep mourning, uncanny, artificial belonging, misfortune to her life.

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Introduction:

Tennyson's "The Lady Of Shalott" is one of the most well known poems of the Victorian period. Alfred Lord Tennyson uses fall metaphorically throughout "The Lady of Shalott" to illustrate how the Lady of Shalott's life (or lack thereof) progresses. "The Lady of Shalott" tells the story of a Lady imprisoned in a tower by a "curse" that will come upon her if she leaves. The Lady can only view the world through reflections in a mirror. She works at her loom all day until Lancelot rides by, at which point she looks directly at him and notes that the curse came upon her. Leaving her tower, she finds a boat and, singing a song, drifts down to Camelot while she slowly dies. Lancelot gazes at her in the end, pronouncing her face "lovely." This is told in four parts, each of which contains a theme: the first part details the Lady's natural surroundings; the second discusses what the Lady does in her tower; the third describes Lancelot's arrival and the Lady's choice to leave the mirror and her loom; and the fourth shows the Lady's floating and death. Lady of Shalott's life saw very little change. Until there was a very sudden and abrupt sequence of events that led to the death (or winter) of her life. Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott", a poem in four parts, tells the story of a cursed Lady imprisoned on the island of Shalott. Forbidden even a single glance out of her window, she sits each day weaving a tapestry that illustrates the outside world -- which she may glimpse only through her mirror's reflections. One day, however, the Lady hears the voice of Sir Lancelot as he rides by outside, and she catches sight of his reflection in her mirror. Captivated, she steps away from her loom and looks out the window to see him, and thus doomed by her love, the Lady leaves the island on a boat, in which she dies.

Tennyson drew from the Arthurian legend of Elaine of Astolat, who fell in unrequited love with Lancelot, and died only after ordering her body to be floated down the river towards Camelot (Stevenson 236). However, Tennyson adds multiple elements to the story: "...He did not completely adopt the story of Elaine as it was to be found in Malory...and the Italian novella of La Damigello di Scalot, which was presumably its more immediate source, had no tower, tapestry, mirror, or curse" (Stevenson 236). Tennyson added these things and must have had a reason for doing so. Until there was a very sudden and abrupt sequence of events that led to the death (or winter) of her life. In addition viewing fall at the micro level one does not see a fixed display of weather. On the contrary, fall is made up of some clear

and warm days and some cold and dismal days. This would lead to the belief that fall is neither hot nor cold, but that it is actually in the middle somewhere. In other words fall is a gray area. It is neither black nor white. A reference to this can be seen in the sixth line of stanza two when Tennyson describes The Lady of Shalott's abode as, "Four gray walls, and four gray towers." Likewise three key quotes help to illustrate three different stages in Lady Shalott's life. Tennyson characterizes the first stage of Lady Shalott's life where she is cursed and cut off from society as cold and somber. This feeling can be seen in, "Little breezes dusk and shiver (ln. 11). The Lady is caught in the trap of weaving, is not able to make her own decisions. When the *curse comes upon* her, she lies "robed in snowy white," in her virginal state to drift toward Camelot. The Lady is seen, again, unable to act upon her own will and arrives "dead pale" to her destination.

The Victorian period was the most prosperous era among the previous ones since the industrial revolution in Britain was expanding. Women, both in social and domestic life, from the middle class up to aristocrats, spent their time with needlecraft. Tennyson derives his inspiration for the poem that makes the Lady engage in weaving, like the Victorian women who kept themselves occupied with needlework in the pursuit of reproducing or rebuilding their own dreams, knowing they will be subjected to "redundancy".

Discussion:

The most famous Victorian lyrical ballad is "The Lady of Shalott", first published in 1832. The narrative of the lady's isolation, magical weaving, mysterious curse, and fatal glimpse of Lancelot in her mirror is also balladic in strategy. The ballad allows Tennyson to note only, "She has heard a whisper say,/ A Curse is on her if she stay/ To look down to Camelot" (39-41) , just as ballad conventions dictates that she accept her condition as a given: "She knows not what the curse may be,/ And so she weaveth steadily (42-43). The legend of "The Lady of Shalott", as inherited by Tennyson from the medieval romances, projects a potent image of woman destroyed by misplaced love- love which brings to the surface the dilemmas of the man who is the object of that love, and of the society that surrounds them both. Tennyson responds this story in a complex way which inspired a succession of painters to use his re-creation of a medieval tale to explore their own responses to a powerful poetic image of a woman.

An atmosphere of mystery pervades the poem, one of the reasons it so intrigued Pre-Raphaelite artists, who were eager to express the images of their imaginations (Nelson 4). Tennyson opens the poem with descriptions of the beautiful island on which the Lady is imprisoned, rather than explaining anything about the Lady herself. He finally mentions her in the last line of the second stanza, and even then, only briefly. The vibrancy of the outside world contrasts with the Lady's prison of "gray" walls and towers, asserting her isolation from the activity of life. Yet although Tennyson introduces the Lady in this stanza, the poem's sense of mystery continues. Throughout the poem, Tennyson thoroughly details the

outside world, while the Lady remains a woman of mystery. Tennyson does not explain what the Lady looks like, why the Lady is cursed, or her inner state of mind. One of the only times the Lady speaks during the poem, and one of the only times Tennyson alludes to her thoughts or emotions, occurs in the eighth stanza.

But in her web she still delights
To weave the mirror's magic sights,
For often through the silent nights
A funeral, with plumes and lights
And music, went to Camelot (line: Part II, 28-32)

The poem, with its larger last part, leaves the reader on the crest of a wave. Each stanza is nine lines long, and contains four lines in either iambic or trochaic tetrameter followed by one line in iambic hexameter, followed by three lines again in either iambic or trochaic tetrameter, followed by one line in iambic hexameter. The poem's meter thus flows, wave-like, between longer and shorter lines. Tennyson considered this declaration the poem's most crucial moment. Although at first the Lady seemed content to remain isolated from the darkness and sadness of the world outside, another aspect of that life appealed to her: seeing the "two young lovers lately wed" made her yearn for a lover of her own. Tennyson's use of contrasts within the poem highlights this conflict. As mentioned before, Tennyson juxtaposes descriptions of the lively outside world with the Lady's stark, static existence in her room. Although the Lady might be satisfied with safely weaving her tapestry from a distance, removed from the pain the world outside could offer, her admission in this stanza proves that she is not content.

The Lady of Shalott did not have this luxury, as she was cursed with eternal seclusion from society. Therefore, even the slightest step towards entering the real world is enough to destroy her and her art. Her fatal ending is fitting, for in Tennyson's era, it seemed that societal conventions were, in fact, more prized than creativity or intellect. In particular, Tennyson complained about Hunt's interpretation in his *The Lady of Shalott*, which detailed the scene in which the Lady looks out her window and realizes her fate. Hunt's painting, very similar to his Moxon Tennyson version of the scene, depicts the Lady in elaborate surroundings, unlike the stark room described in the poem. Hunt also takes the liberty of representing the Lady tangled in her tapestry's threads, a detail not included in the poem and of which Tennyson did not approve. However, Hunt had a purpose in straying from certain elements of the poem. For example, the ornate decoration of the Lady's room served to communicate concepts such as the conflict between pure love and romantic, passionate love, a tension represented by the image of the Virgin and Child on the left side of the painting and the image of Hercules taking the golden apples of Hesperides on the right side of the painting. Other elaborations of the poem, such as the details of the Lady's hair blowing violently about her and the threads of the Lady's tapestry entangling her, reinforce Hunt's rendition of a wild emotional state. These deviations do not detract from viewers' recognition of the subject matter. For example, Hunt includes the Lady's loom and the cracked mirror

with Lancelot's reflection, which identify the painting as the climactic scene from Tennyson's poem. The poem's demonstration of the melancholy aspects of love, and the spiritual state of suffering for love, fascinated the Pre-Raphaelites. The poem dealt with the popular topic of unrequited love, and the Lady of Shalott exemplified the unattainable woman, the cursed woman, and the woman sacrificing everything for a doomed love (Nelson 6). Artists such as Hunt, Waterhouse, and Shaw emphasized these themes by illustrating the most tragic scenes of the poem.

The imagery and diction of the first part also creates a feeling of action; the nature and everything in it moves linearly, whether to Camelot or around the isle. The Lady, by contrast, sits embowered in the tower, completely motionless, not engaging directly with the real world. The setting establishes the binary of motion versus immobility, presenting the tension in which the Lady exists. Although Victorian attitudes towards women were highly complex, the most striking difference between male artists' representations of the Lady of Shalott and female artists' representations occurred in the artists' attitudes towards the Lady as a woman. Male artists stressed the Lady's position as an object of desire, depicting her as an idealized, sensual woman: beautiful, mysterious, pure, and above all, unattainable (Nelson 7). These characteristics of the Lady contributed to her supreme desirability, which was emphasized in illustrations by artists such as Meteyard, Hunt, and Rossetti. In "*I Am Half-Sick of Shadows,*" *Said the Lady of Shalott*, Meteyard painted the moment at which the Lady declared the famous line. However, the emphasis of the painting does not seem to be upon the Lady's emotional distress, but rather on the Lady as a beautiful, sensual woman. The Lady reclines erotically in her seat, the thin, soft fabrics of her dress accentuating the shape of her body. Her head leans to one side, revealing the delicate white skin of her neck, intensified in contrast to the darker shades of the painting. Flowers surround the Lady; like her, they are delicately soft and pale. The Lady's eyes are closed as though she is lost in a dream, and this position highlights her situation as a vulnerable object: she cannot see anything, but anyone may stare at her, as her sensual pose invites viewers to do.

She performs for the audience of those in hearing, but she cannot directly see her audience and they cannot see her at all (at least according to the poem's speaker). However, these reapers, presumably male, "whisper / 'Tis the fairy Lady of Shalott" (35-36). The reapers, characterizing the Lady as a "fairy," give her a character and perhaps even an appearance without ever laying eyes on her. Tennyson used the word "fairy" in his 1864 poem "Alymer's Field" in a way that means "Resembling a fairy, fairy-like; delicate, finely formed or woven" ("Fairy."). I would apply the same definition to this context; "fairy Lady" evokes an image of a slender, flitting creature. Thus, the reapers describe the Lady, who is a weaver, as woven herself, a work of art already. The men interpret her performance and make the unknown being in the tower into a dainty mythical creature. The poem's second part introduces the curse, the rest of the Lady's audience, and her work. The Lady: weaves by night and day A magic web with colours gay. She has heard a whisper say, A curse is on her if she stay To look down to Camelot. (38-42) What is the subject of her web? She weaves images of the outside world that she sees in her mirror, turning funerals or young lovers strolling in the lane into art. For the Lady and the reapers, a turning of the actual into a work

of art is a mutual impulse. Neither the reapers nor the Lady have directly seen what they wish to represent, and they mould the unknown into more easily accessible and manageable art. The depiction of death has also been interpreted as sleep. Critic Christine Poulson says that sleep has a connotation of physical abandonment and vulnerability, which can either suggest sexual fulfilment or be a metaphor for virginity. Fairytales, such as Sleeping Beauty or Snow White, have traditionally depended upon this association. So, as related to the Lady of Shalott, Poulson says: "for in death [she] has become a Sleeping Beauty who can never be wakened, symbols of perfect feminine passivity. Critics such as Hatfield have suggested that *The Lady of Shalott* is a representation of how Tennyson viewed society. In the poem "The Lady of Shalott", Alfred, Lord Tennyson presents a conceptual metaphor pertaining to the social context of the condition of women during the Victorian period. Tennyson, who was the Poet Laureate of England in 1850, composed this poem in order to emphasize the inequality of men and women in Victorian Britain. The roles of women were restricted to domesticity because society imposed this on them, and they were stereotyped as the "other" and "less" when compared to men, who in ancient times were trained how to gather food and supplies for the survival of their families. As a result, women felt inferior and were subjected to oppression. Thus, their suppressed feelings made them crave immensely for equality and redemption. It is arguable that a person who faces oppression has the tendency to find comfort instead of fighting back. Joseph Chadwick (1986) notes how the Lady makes herself feel like a free person through the tasks that have been given to her.

The Lady of Shalott is considered an emblem of the women who suffered from marginalisation in a gender ideological society from the Middle Ages to the Victorian period. Akin to the Lady of Shalott, women's contributions in society were not considered essential because the working opportunities for them were limited and they were not as robust as men were. This kind of upheaval made women gradually seek change. The Lady is also introduced to traits of females through her observation. The poem's speaker notes that she sees "the red cloaks of market girls" (53); "a troop of damsels glad" (55); and the "two lovers lately wed" (70), one of which would be a female. The Lady does not see the market girls but rather their cloaks, defining them through their clothing. Stevenson states that seeing "real emotion" was the cause of the Lady's declaration of half-sickness. In this view, emotion was the driving force that influenced her to eventually leave the tower. However, nothing in the poem implies that these young lovers were the first the Lady had ever seen, and influenced her in this moment to see real emotion for the first time; she had previously been observing people on the road for an unspecified amount of time. The Lady of Shalott finds refuge in her confinement within the tower by monotonously weaving a colourful web. Hence, Sharyn Urdall mentions that the mirror symbolizes purity, truth, and fidelity (34), but the Lady has not yet discovered her identity at all. This prohibition is brought about by her marginalisation from the "public sphere", where patriarchy dominates society. As a result, the Lady is only entitled to stay in the "private sphere" through her submissiveness. The woman's role she had observed was one in which women were defined by those around them—in other words, their audience. The Lady saw not one market girl with others around her, but a group of market girls. Her acknowledgement of half-sickness suggests awareness of her lack and the odd state of her individuality. In 1848, six years after his revision of "The Lady of Shalott" and one

year before the completion of *In Memoriam*, his elegy to Hallam, Tennyson arrived at the sea in the West Country of England.

The suppressed feelings and thoughts that she keeps gradually surface in her consciousness. She feels the burden of being incomplete and becoming subjected to “social castration”, an idea of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, which characterizes women’s inadequacy in terms of social power. Lancelot’s voice has an intrinsic significance to the Lady since she also sings at times, in which “Only reapers, reaping early,/ In among the bearded barley,/ Hear a song that echoes cheerly”(ll. 28- 30); thus, it suggests that singing is the only communication of the lady with the outer world, and hearing Lancelot makes her feel that someone is responding and understanding her. Edgar Shannon Jr. notes that Lancelot’s singing strengthens her will to disregard the curse. The Lady deduces that the curse comes upon her by what happens next; the mirror cracks and the web “floated wide”. Flavia Alaya views the curse as that which causes the Lady to leave her life as isolated artist and to feel emotion: “The Lady of Shalott” might well have said for the first time, ‘I have felt.’ At this point in the poem, the curse is indeed come upon the Lady of Shalott, and all such ladies who are surrogates for the artist”. James Kincaid suggests that, “The broadest, most general irony of the poem is that the Lady simply exchanges one kind of imprisonment for another; her presumed freedom is her death.” It seems that the Lady cannot escape tragedy. Carl Plasa claims that the Lady’s journey towards Camelot through death conveys its own resistance to the transgression of gender divisions. It illustrates how difficult it is for women to define their identity, and when they do, there are constant obstructions in their way. The Lady, after crying out that the curse has come upon her, leaves the tower and approaches the water: In the stormy east-wind straining, The pale yellow woods were waning, The broad stream in his banks complaining, Heavily the low sky raining Over tower’d Camelot (118-122). “The Lady of Shalott” is not a name but an identity informing her of gender and location, forever tying her to Shalott here. The Lady performs her death for males and for God. The song itself seems to contain power; a new unspecified audience, “they,” hears “a carol, mournful, holy, / Chanted loudly, chanted lowly, / Till her blood was frozen slowly” (145-147). “They” cannot know her blood is frozen slowly; to me, it is almost like the song brings about the freezing of the blood, as if the Lady uses the song as a spell that casts death. Whatever the song’s power, she still sings for an audience of the divine.

He compares the boat’s movement with that of sailors “rising and dropping” on the water, and also with the “wild warblings” of the dying swans. The end stopping of the first four lines imply a ceasing of smooth motion which completely halts with the caesura in the fifth line; this line and the next, however, have no end stopping, allowing the boat to drift in peace for an instant until the audience (“they”) is introduced. She sings, she performs, and she is heard despite the energetic water. Nevertheless, this version of the poem goes on to detail the death of the Lady; her “smooth face sharpened slowly”; she is “a pale, pale corpse” and “deadcold.” The Lady undergoes a definite change from smoothness to sharpness. The water does not kill the Lady; she dies on the water, but the curse kills her. In the end, though, the water is still an energetic medium for death. According to Joyce Green, this poem was one of the five “predominately unpopular” poems in the original 1832 collection that Tennyson

decided to revise (678), implying the poem held significance to him, at least causing him to re-approach the poem. Her very performance changes; the song, while still containing finality, is not tinted with death. She is no longer a corpse, but a standard of safe loveliness. Water becomes a limitless grave, something that cannot provide certainty or stability even in death. The sailor “drops” into the water, implying an unceremonious burial; no audience for the death exists, no one can see the body in the hammock-shroud. The sailor is simply lost after death. Furthermore, the sea has taken this life even as the 26 mother invokes God, establishing tension between religious power and nature. The use of water as a medium through which to describe his loss shows Tennyson’s enduring fascination with the sea and with water, which had the power to destroy life.

Conclusion:

Tennyson, through Lancelot’s words, removes the sexual suggestion of peering at the prone female body by considering only her face and the audience of God. Tennyson’s watery life serves as an important frame for reading “The Lady of Shalott.” The feminine gender has been marginalised as passive and weak for a very long time, whereas the masculine one was the active and industrial gender with the tendency to be domineering. Women who cross the barriers of the “public sphere” of industry encounter difficulties because they always have to watch their conduct and prove that they can surpass other’s expectations or criteria that have been imposed on them.

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