

“The Lady of Shalott”: A Reconsideration

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Abstract. Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" has been predominantly regarded and treated as an allegorical poem, at the expense of its literal/topical dimensions. This paper tries to analyze the poem in the light of Victorian attitudes toward women and of Tennyson's over-all position with respect to the same issue. It is shown that sexuality, in Tennyson's opinion, is not only the determining factor in a woman's development toward maturity, but also the strongest force leading to female rebelliousness against social traditions. Unfortunately, this means a Victorian woman's death. With this literal/topical interpretation, the allegorical level of the poem is enriched, especially when the other side of the lady's environment, the low life surrounding her castle, is brought into the picture. The choices of the allegorical artist become more defined and more immediate.

That the woman question was the subject of controversy in the Victorian Age needs no illustration. Whether one skims through anthologies or through works of scholarship and criticism pertaining to the period, he will rest with the conviction that the question had a considerable urgency and weight at that time. Such questions as the nature of the female character, the position of women in society, the strict antithetical, Wempeckian division of the world in terms of home as the peaceful kingdom of angelic women and non-home as the battlefield of warring men received persistent attention from intellectuals of both sexes. Some discussed; some analyzed; some painted; some grumbled. Even a busy thinker like J.S. Mill found it necessary to explore such related issues in a work which he tellingly called *The Subjection of Women*. Marlow in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, despite his emotional involvement in his male-dominated narrative, spares no occasion to make several comments, significantly misogynistic, on the question. At one point he remarks, "They —the

women I mean— are out of it —should be out of it [the world of men]. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse.”⁽¹⁾

It is interesting to notice at the outset that Tennyson, in his poem “The Lady of Shalott,” as well as in many of his other poems, chooses a woman as his main character. Obviously, the woman question is involved, for it is also well established, though not often discussed, that Tennyson was particularly interested in women. One can say that he was not only preoccupied but even fascinated with them. A rapid review of his poems, especially in his early years as a poet, would highlight such fascination. From his juvenilia a number of poems would stand out at any scanning: “Mandeline,” “Lilian,” “Isabel,” “Mariana,” “Claribel,” “Adeline,” “Margaret,” “Rosalind,” “Eleanore,” and “Kate.” Each of these poems depicts a type of woman as an interesting and even elusive subject, which Tennyson seems to approach delicately as one would approach a butterfly with the purpose of catching it. However, the subject is never firmly controlled. One even senses somehow that Tennyson, for all his concern and preoccupation, is, at this stage in his career, simply too shy or too uncertain to fix his subject for any careful scrutiny. However, as he matured and as his poetic and intellectual character crystallized, his treatment of the question grew more and more complex and substantive, for his interest never slackened. Two of his middle-age poems, “Maud” and *The Princess*, deal specifically with women, the former more or less symbolically, the latter directly and obliquely. Even his epic poem *The Idylls of the King* is, to a great extent, centered on women.

In the light of this background, I would argue that “The Lady of Shalott” reflects Tennyson’s persistent interest in the woman question, and such topical interpretation should be given its due weight before any allegorical understanding, important and valid as this may be. And this is what I intend to do in this paper, I will first explicate the poem topically, or, in the spirit of the poem itself, relinquish the shadows of the allegory for the light of reality, and then I will define the implications of its allegorical appraisal.

A. The Topical Interpretation

The Lady of Shalott, isolated as she is within her castle on an island amidst scenes of work, natural forces, and emotions, and occupied as she is with weaving, is

(1) 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1971), p. 49.

an emblem, a poetic representation of the Victorian woman as we see her in the writings of the age. A virtual hostage of a mysterious force, she glaringly illustrates Dinah Maria Mulock's image of Victorian woman, "And so their whole energies are devoted to the massacre of old Time. They prick him to death with crochet and embroidery needles; strum him dead with piano and harp-playing — not music."⁽²⁾ Florence Nightingale significantly wonders, "Now, why is it more ridiculous for a man than for a woman to do worsted work and drive out every day in a carriage? Why should we laugh if we were to see a parcel of men sitting around a drawing room table in the morning, and think it all right if they were women?"⁽³⁾ It is to be noted here that only well-to-do ladies were plagued with this boring life, since, on the other hand, women of lower classes were often obliged by economic circumstances to go out and earn their living and even become wandering preachers like Dinah in George Eliot's *Adam Bede*. The Lady of Shalott has apparently the curse of aristocracy upon her. Her life is reduced to endless weaving — an act of sublimation imposed upon here by society — and occasional singing, as she kills Old Time within her walled palace.

In Victorian literature, too, the Lady of Shalott is a recurrent figure. Her nearest relative is Tennyson's Mariana, who, waiting patiently for her man, has to give up all hope. Additionally, she dares not step outside her moated grange. She also spends her life in shadows, grumbling, weeping, and crying in agony and distress that here life is dreary and that she is weary. She also seems to be condemned to life imprisonment, because of which she longs for death as a means of escape.⁽⁴⁾ In Victorian fiction, too, the association of women with home is a very common theme, and its psychological and social implications are variously dramatized, Esther of Dickens' *Bleak House* and Emilia of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* are examples in this respect. And if women refuse to conform to what Monica Feinberg calls the "domestic myth,"⁽⁵⁾ they are incarcerated on the pretext of madness, like Bertha Mason of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.

(2) From a selection of *A Woman's Thoughts about Women*, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. N.H. Abrams et al., 4th ed. (New York: Norton, 1979), II, 1661-2.

(3) From a selection of *Cassandra*, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. N.H. Abrams et al., 4th ed. (New York: Norton, 1979), II, 1965.

(4) The question of the insipidity of good women in Victorian literature has often been discussed by critics of the period. See, for example, Katherine M. Rogers, "A Defence of Thackeray's Amelia," *TSLI*, 2 (1970), 1367-74; Russell Fraser, "Pernicious Casuistry: A Study of Character in *Vanity Fair*," *NCL*, 7 (1957), 137-47; Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen Forties* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1954); Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982); and Monica Feinberg, "Family Plot: The Bleak House of Victorian Romance," *VN*, 76 (Fall 1989).

(5) "Family Plot: The Bleak House of Victorian Romance," *VN*, 76 (Fall 1989), 5.

Though not exactly like Bertha Mason, the Lady of Shalott is incarcerated and lives under a curse which is symbolically social: she is not to cease weaving and “look down” to Camelot. Psychologically, she is reduced to a ghost or a fairy. The poet wonders:

But who has seen her wave her hand?
 Or at the casement seen her stand?
 Or is she known in all the land,
 The Lady of Shalott?

Were it not for her occasional singing, she would be dead to the outside world. Her existence, even if only as a shadow or a fairy, depends upon her singing, and at this point it is her only identity, the lowest on the scale, the identity of existence.

Now against the permanence of the curse and the Lady’s situation in general, the poem portrays a growing, developing woman as she receives stimuli from the outside world. That there is a curse imposed upon her she is fully aware, though what this may be she does not know and does not even care to. At this stage she weaves incessantly with very little “other care.” Then her sense of her plight sharpens. She sees various scenes of life’s drama before her in the mirror — “the surly village churls,” the “cloaks of market girls,” “a troop of damsels glad,” “an abbot on an ambling pad,” a “shepherd lad,” and a “long-hair’d page in crimson clad.” She sees all these, but none elicits any emotion from her. She sees but does not feel. Then knights pass by, and here for the first time in the poem there is a response. She realizes that she has no loyal and true knight. Although this realization might be a statement of fact at this juncture in her psychological and biological development, it is overwrought with self-pity. However, she still “delights” in her web “to weave the mirror’s magic sights,” especially that the drama of life, in one of its scenes, presents death as a funeral going down to Camelot “with plumes and lights/ And music,” Somehow, here prison becomes a refuge from the world of mutability and mortality. Somehow, she delights in the illusion that her continual weaving under the curse is a protection against death, forgetting that she is herself a developing and maturing human being. She rests satisfied with her mysterious fate. Nonetheless, the realization of who she really is and what she really wants comes upon her slowly but steadily. In the very same stanza where she still delights in weaving, she gives expression to a complaint, mild but clear, “I am half sick of shadows.” But why? The answer is also easy to understand for “... when the moon was overhead,/Came two young lovers lately wed.” Now her field of vision becomes complete as soon as the two extremes are highlighted. On the one hand, the outside world signifies death, degeneration and burial, but, on the other hand, it stands for love, wedding, marriage, and generation.

These two aspects go together, coexist and coalesce, giving meaning to each other. Now something awakens in the Lady of Shalott, not so much a self-pitying realization of fact as in the previous stanza, but a stronger emotion, an instinctive half-revolt against her fate, the taboo imposed upon her by some mysterious external forces.

Actually, taboo is the very word that rightly describes the uncanny situation she is embroiled in. In this connection Freud says, "The basis of taboo is a prohibited action, for performing which a strong inclination exists in the unconscious."⁽⁶⁾ The prohibited action in the case of the Lady of Shalott is looking down to Camelot, which, along with the whole Arthurian legend, was regarded by Victorians as a symbol of illicit sex and moral corruption. Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* is a good example. Whichever way we choose to look at it, we have to come to the conclusion that sex is one of its pivotal motifs. Apart from the Queen's guilt, her infidelity to Arthur and adulterous relation with Lancelot, there is also incest, which, as Betty Miller believes, destroys Arthur's kingdom.⁽⁷⁾ Tennyson himself spelled out his theme, "I intended Arthur to represent the ideal soul of man coming into contact with the war-ring elements of the flesh."⁽⁸⁾ So, Camelot is meant to suggest betrayal of ideals, violation of trust, and the corrupting influence of women and particularly of illicit sex. However, Tennyson proposes at the same time that these banes are part and parcel of reality and as such cannot be denied nor successfully inhibited.

The recurrence in Victorian literature of the Arthurian legend in general and of Merlin in particular has been dealt with by many critics. Clifton Snider, quoting Emma Jung and Marie-louisie von Franz, says, "When such a thing happens ... 'it is obvious, from the psychological point of view, that it is a case of the breakthrough of an archetypal image which represents an intensively constellated psychic content'."⁽⁹⁾ Snider adds, "Though literal belief in Merlin was unlikely, he compensated, in the Jungian sense, for contemporary doubts about the supernatural, as well as for Victorian prudishness."⁽¹⁰⁾

In the light of all this, the Lady of Shalott, a name which significantly rhymes with Camelot as if the two were kin and any sexual relation would be incest, is prohibited to look down to the place, the phrasal verb suggesting that the action would be debasing and degrading in the Victorian system of morality, in which sex was "some-

(6) *Totem and Taboo*, tr. James Strachy (New York: Norton, 1950), p. 32.

(7) "Merlin in Victorian Poetry: A Jungian Analysis." *VN*, 72 (Fall 1987), 51.

(8) *Ibid.*, p. 51.

(9) See "Tennyson and the Sinful Queen," *Twentieth Century*, 163 (Oct. 1955), 355-63.

(10) Quoted in Harold Nicolson, *Tennyson: Aspects of His Life, Character and Poetry* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962).

thing nasty.”⁽¹¹⁾ The “conspiracy of silence”⁽¹²⁾ about sex, as Houghton says, was “partly a mistaken effort to protect the child, especially the boy from temptation ... but at bottom it sprang from the personal feeling of revulsion. For the sexual act was associated by many wives only with a duty and by most husbands with a necessary if pleasurable yielding to one’s baser nature: by few, therefore, with an innocent and joyful experience.”⁽¹³⁾

And it is at this stage of the Lady’s half-awakening to her true situation and her half-protest that Sir Lancelot, the Queen’s lover, appears in the mirror, the Lady’s field of consciousness. He is appropriately presented with all the temptation and fascination of virility. It is now that her instinctive development is to be culminated. In four out of five stanzas that make up Part III of the poem, Tennyson leisurely dwells on the Queen’s lover, employing all the tools of his picturesque, or rather cinematic, art. The light imagery, derived mainly from the sun and the stars as if a new fate were dawning on the Lady, is combined with suggestions of fertility in nature and with pleasant, luring sounds, to present a living man more or less the creation of the Lady’s fantasy. Virtually, he shatters her specious, deceiving equipose by managing, to borrow a phrase from *Paradise Lost*, “to lure her eye.”

That the Lady’s instinctive awakening is greatly sexual receives support from various quarters. Not only the associations elicited by Lancelot in the context of *The Idylls of the King* but also the Lady’s emotional reactions which contrast dramatically with her previous passivity all indicate that for Tennyson sexuality is the major driving force in, as well as for, women. This view is borne out by similar opinions in his other and later works. In *The Idylls*, for example, Guinevere’s revolt against her perfect king is explicitly attributed to her sexual passion which he cannot gratify. With dauntless candor she complains to Lancelot, who is somehow reluctant in his submission to her blind desire, “... but, friend, to me / He is all fault who hath no fault at all./ For who loves me must have a touch of earth;/ The low sun makes the color.” Lucilia, in Tennyson’s late poem “Lucretius,” is moved not by agape but by eros, not by love but by sexual desire, which her husband, preoccupied with intellectual matters of great weight, cannot satisfy. Not caring to return her kiss, he passes by her, his mind pondering “those three hundred scrolls/ Left by the Teacher, whom he held divine.” The philtre which she has concocted for him confuses his physical and mental faculties, leading to his dissolution, collapse and death. Such is the force of blind

(11) Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind: 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1957), p. 353.

(12) *Ibid.*

(13) *Ibid.*

sexual desire in women; such are the consequences, in the Victorian system of thought, of granting freedom to them. And here lies the basis of Victorian misogyny, some remnants of which we see in Conrad's Marlow.

Sir Lancelot, now the object of sexual taboo, is characteristically marked with some ambivalence. It is true that he is presented in an ambience of light, but the light is too dazzling to be comfortable to vision. Moreover, there is an ominous fire in the picture, especially in the figurative language used, “The helmet and the helmet-feather/Burn'd like one burning flame together.” Then there is the image of the “bearded meteor, trailing light.” In short, Sir Lancelot is depicted as both light and fire, boon and bane. Technically, Tennyson manages to bring out the ambivalence by distancing the Lady from the field of vision in which Lancelot appears. In the four stanzas that introduce him, she is absent. So, virtually she is not looking, but, nevertheless, she sees the whole picture, like a prudish girl of her age. Such ambivalence evoked by the object is a peculiar feature of all taboos. Freud's opinion on the subject is categorical: “The principle characteristic of the psychological constellation which becomes fixed in this way is what might be described as the subject's ambivalent attitude toward a single object, or rather toward one act in connection with that object. He is constantly wishing to perform the act (the touching), ... and detests it as well.”⁽¹⁴⁾ And if the conflict arising from such ambivalence seems to be muted in the *Lady of Shalott*, it is because the two tendencies “are localized in the subject's mind in such a manner that they cannot come up against each other. The prohibition is unconscious and the subject knows nothing of it.”⁽¹⁵⁾

For this very reason, the reaction of the Lady of Shalott lacks any deliberation or forethought. Apparently, the forepleasure generated in the Lady impels her to seek the object and to touch it irrespective of the consequences. The first step is an impulsive rejection of the repressive situation:

She left the web, she left the loom,
 She made three paces through the room,
 She saw the water-lily bloom,
 She saw the helmet and the plume,
 She looked down to Camelot.

In short, she commits the prohibited act. Although the regularity of the lines, the parallelism employed and the unified rhyme all indicate a certain measure of

(14) *Totem and Taboo*, p. 29.

(15) *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

organized soul, as if for a very short duration the priorities of the Lady are clearly set and neatly ordered, the future is not so bright. Like Eve, The Lady disobeys the injunction, and, like Eve, she is to be punished, “‘The curse is come upon me,’ cried the Lady of Shalott,” for “Out flew the web and floated wide;/ The Mirror crack’d from side to side.”

Nature itself, feeling the seriousness of the “crime” and abhorring it, sallies forth with alarming suddenness to lynch the rebellious woman:

In the stormy east-wind straining,
The pale yellow woods were waning,
The broad stream in his bank complaining,
Heavily the low sky raining
Over tower’d Camelot.

The Victorians seem to have managed to proselyte nature to their own religion and even to enlist it to punish the advocates of its own beliefs and practices. Victorian nature is a renegade. In the Lady’s emotional act of revolt, at the very instant of her psychological awakening, she seems to have antagonized an unsympathetic and even hostile Victorian nature to which she will soon fall victim, a brutal reality to which she is not yet fully ready. No one but a Victorian poet, or at least a writer writing in the spirit of the Victorian Age, would mobilize nature in this way.⁽¹⁶⁾

But on her part there is no retreat. The desire to touch the prohibited sexual object in violation of all injunctions and in pursuit of her initial impulse, seems to have mastered the will and the intellect. The sexual force, which we see as more calculating, more refined, and more scheming in George Bernard Shaw’s life force, is now acting as a crude, tumultuous, blind Schopenhauerian desire, only because it has been repressed so long and so mercilessly. The imagery now becomes kinetic, and the direction is downward, “Down she came,” “... down the river ... did she look down to Camelot,” and “down she lay.” The poem begins to verge on the fantastic and the mythical. Almost preternaturally, she finds a boat waiting for her, and on it she writes her name, “The Lady of Shalott,” thus giving herself an identity more

(16) Such Victorian concept of nature is dramatized in several works of which I mention here *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and *The Return of the Native*. Tennyson in *In Memoriam* describes nature as “red in Tooth and claw” and says, “Are God and Nature then at strife,/That Nature lends such evil dreams?/So careful of the type she seem,/So careless of the single life.”

assertive than the previous one.⁽¹⁷⁾ Her blind determination, not discouraged by the omens, never slackens. Somehow, her desire to touch the prohibited object, on her way to full maturity and self-realization, is hardened into a state of mind which can best be described as obsessive, possessed, and suicidal:

Like some bold seer in a trance,
Seeing all his own mischance —
With a glassy countenance
Did she look to Camelot.

With the ambivalence still active, she, singing her last song, is borne down the stream to Camelot, through the noises of the night and amidst the falling leaves. However, Camelot is no more something she *looks down* to.

As I have said earlier, she is not fully ready for the antagonistic Victorian nature — or, more appropriately, reality — she is now unwittingly struggling against. In her emotional outburst and blind desire, she leaves the palace in a snowy-white robe — that is, unprotected and unequipped.⁽¹⁸⁾ In this condition she is an easy victim to nature. Her blood is frozen. Her eyes are “darkened wholly.” “Dead pale” she floats silent into Camelot, earning herself the recognition, cool and ambivalent, of the scared knights as they read her name on the prow. But she has turned into a taboo, for the watching knights cross themselves in fear, with no one daring to touch her or caring to give her a burial. “Anyone who has violated a taboo becomes taboo himself because he possesses the dangerous quality of tempting others to follow his example: why should he be allowed to do what is forbidden to others? Thus he is truly contagious in that every example encourages imitation, and for that reason he himself must be shunned.”⁽¹⁹⁾ Lancelot, throwing an admiring look on the dead woman, comments, “She has a lovely face,” and wishes “God in his mercy lend her grace.” The unexpected situation is chillingly ironic.

(17) The Lady of the 1842 revised version of the poem is more assertive, but as Masao Miyoshi says, “the 1833 version manages a more convincing identity for the lady.” *The Divided Self* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1969), p. 153n.

(18) The fact that the lady is unprotected physically suggests that for Tennyson women are unfit for society and reality not for anything wrong in their nature but for reasons relating to education. Thus, Tennyson’s position in the Victorian controversy on the subject seems to be outlined here rather clearly.

(19) *Totem and Taboo*, p. 32.

Thus dies the Lady of Shalott, a victim of Victorian morality and of a poet who, at the time of writing the poem was still in the process of finding himself an identity. Like Eve, the Lady of Shalott violates a taboo and suffers death as a consequence. But she wakes up. Paradoxically as this may sound, the living people of this earth are, in the language and framework of the Bible, dead though awake. Tennyson's poem, with its many suggestions of "woman's" first disobedience and the original sin, seems to be a reworking of the Christian myth in Victorian terms. Tennyson may have succeeded in this respect, but he has created a melodramatic lady/woman not a tragic heroine.

B. The Allegorical Interpretation

The well-established allegorical interpretation of the poem revolves around an identity crisis, the poet's place and role in his society, his detachment from reality which he contemplates through a mirror as opposed to his commitment to social issues.⁽²⁰⁾ Miyoshi, speaking about the Lady's death, remarks that "art, after all, may be quite irrelevant to reality."⁽²¹⁾ He adds, "Even in death art disquiets the world, like a ghost haunting the murderer."⁽²²⁾ Another critic says in this connection, "Tennyson is engaged in a lifelong search for stable identity He is fully aware that a death of the imagination ... is the price the poet may have to pay for trying, like the Lady of Shalott, to make his world human."⁽²³⁾ However, these allegorical interpretations seem to ignore some basic points. They do not, for example, account for the taboo nor for the significance of Camelot, in general, and of Sir Lancelot, in particular. Thus, they somehow violate the principle of correspondence which is suggested by Dante as a basis of allegory in his opinion on the four levels of interpretation:

In bringing out this meaning [the allegorical], the literal sense should always come first, it being the meaning in which the others are contained and without which it would be impossible and irrational to come to an understanding of the others, particularly the allegorical. It would be impossible because, in the case of anything which has an outside and an inside, it is impossible to come to the inside without first coming to the outside.

(20) Patricia M. Ball, in her article "Tennyson and the Romantics," (*VP*, 1963), speaks of Tennyson's "crisis of personality." Other critics have explored in depth this crisis, which takes the form of tensions, divided self, and opposed voices. See, for example, Harold Nicolson, *Tennyson: Aspects of his Life, Character and Poetry* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962); E.D.G. Johnson, *The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry: Sources of the Poetic Imagination in Tennyson, Browning and Arnold* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1952); and Masao Miyoshi, *The Divided Self* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1969).

(21) Miyoshi, p. 115.

(22) *Ibid.*

(23) W. David Shaw, *Tennyson's Style* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1976), p. 65.

Thus, since in a text the literal meaning is always the outside, it is impossible to come to the others, without first coming to the literal.⁽²⁴⁾

Allegorically, the Lady of Shalott is the poet, her weaving and singing being primary attributes of creativity and beauty. She is forbidden, under penalty of some sort, to stop weaving “the mirror’s magic sights” and to *look down* to Camelot, which is allegorically the locus of romance. Actually, even the mirror, which is to be taken as the Lady’s unconscious, both personal and collective in Jung’s psychology, seems to reflect a great deal of the world of romance, of king Arthur and his knights of the Round Table along with some less significant sights. And it is the appearance of Sir Lancelot, who, on the literal level, awakens her sexuality as she attains maturity, that inflames her rebelliousness against a major Victorian taboo pertaining to romance, dream and idealism.⁽²⁵⁾ Apparently, Tennyson, in his early years as a poet, seems to hold the notion that there is an inborn tendency in the poet for the romantic and the remote as there is a similar tendency in women for sexual experience at the time of maturity, this being the correspondence between the literal and the allegorical that Dante calls for. Now the curse follows a double injunction, as we have seen: to stop weaving and to *look down* to Camelot. Strictly speaking, there is nothing against looking down or up the other way, which points to the world of nature, farming, and farm laborers that embower the Island of Shalott. The first part of the poem is filled with these: “long fields of barley and of rye,” “the lilies,” the willows,” “the aspens,” “flowers” “the reapers,” “the bearded barley,” and the “sheaves” piled by the “reaper weary.” This is all a picture of the lowly life and the humble people as they struggle and suffer to earn their bread in the face of the gentry and the aristocracy. Significantly, it is the people on this side that hear the Lady’s song and recognize her talent, but for them she is a fairy. What kills the lady/poet is her emotional pursuit of the aristocratic world of romance as reflected in and by her unconscious. In other words, the poet’s contemplation and heated quest thereafter of romance and romantic visions — or shadows as they are called in the poem — even if they somehow satisfy an innate need or desire, is a violation of taboo of Tennyson’s age.⁽²⁶⁾ The violation, as Tennyson’s Victorian mind tells him, will eventually lead to the poet’s death without getting the recognition he deserves from the unsympathetic and

(24) From a selection of *The Convivio in Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds*, ed. Robert Miller (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 79,80.

(25) Such Victorian prejudice against romance, dream, and idealism is now a commonplace in scholarship and criticism. See, for example, Jerome H. Buckley, *The Victorian Temper: A Study in Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1951).

(26) The situation thus delineated is borne out by historical scholarship on Tennyson as a poet with a double allegiance to Romanticism and Victorianism, to romance and reality. See notes 20 and 25 above. Tennyson’s position in this poem seems to have swung toward Victorianism.

ungrateful world he has mistakenly sought. Put in another way, the conflict the poet faces is between natural tendency and duty. A poet left to self-pity because he cannot gratify his desire is bound to ignore his public responsibility and eventually to commit suicide by blindly and emotionally following his personal desire. Such a poet would not even have the philosophic consolation — though couched in irony — of Lucretius as he says goodbye to his wife, “Thy duty? What is duty? Fare thee well.”

Entwined with this aesthetic allegory is the socio-political dimension of the poem, which serves to clarify the poet’s choices. As I have mentioned earlier, the other side of the world surrounding the Island of Shalott is occupied by lowly people, particularly by agricultural laborers, who were not only forgotten but actually victimized in the war between the aristocracy and the middle classes, as G. Kitson Clark remarks:

But there can be not doubt at all that in many parts of England the picture must be a grim one. In some countries the wages of agricultural labourers were unbelievably low, so low that it is difficult to see how they could have lived and brought up families upon them, whatever auxiliary sources of income they had, and in many cases they seem to have had no auxiliary resources. The hours of labour were intolerably long, while the food upon which a long day’s work sometimes had to be done seems to have been both monotonous and unattractive and also insufficient.⁽²⁷⁾

Even the Reform Bill of 1832 did not change the picture a great deal. As Clark also points out, “It was in fact the old governing class of the country, still in control twenty-seven years after the Reform Bill.”⁽²⁸⁾ Harold Perkin, who believes that the industrial development of England in the nineteenth century is to be attributed, partly at least, to the ruling aristocracy of the country, does not overlook the miserable conditions of the country people, “There is no denying ... that the enclosure of over six million acres of open field ... would have a profound effect on the organization of village society, and extremely unpleasant consequences for the majority of country-dwellers.”⁽²⁹⁾ Moreover, “the agricultural population, in spite of its relative fall, continued to grow absolutely.”⁽³⁰⁾ On the other hand, with factory economy spreading, “agricultural labourers’ wives ... were increasingly forced to work in the fields to make up the exiguous daily income and, in the South of England especially, could not afford the fuel to bake bread or even to cook a hot meal more than once

(27) *The Making of Victorian England* (1962; rpt New York: Athencum, 1967), p. 116.

(28) *Ibid.*, p. 210.

(29) *The Origins of Modern English Society: 1780-1880* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), pp. 125-26.

(30) *Ibid.*, p. 126.

or twice a week."⁽³¹⁾ Perkin in this regard is in agreement with George Trevelyan, "Enclosure had been a necessity, but the enclosures had not brought equal benefits to all. The share of the poor had been inadequate."⁽³²⁾ The small man, consequently, "became a landless labourer."⁽³³⁾

It is with this picture of the socio-economic situation in England in the nineteenth century that "The Lady of Shalott" can be understood more appropriately on the allegorical level. Whether the Lady is conceived of as a poet or a national mouthpiece, the two alternatives are there: glamorous aristocracy associated with romance and lower classes living close to nature and more deserving, in Tennyson's opinion, of attention and concern in England's real world. As the poet intimates, the Lady's choice is not only a grievous but also a fatal mistake, engulfing her in a pernicious "reality" which kills her ruthlessly.

Thus, "The Lady of Shalott" proves to be a complex and well-balanced allegory giving voice to a number of Tennyson's ideas at the beginning of his career as a Victorian poet. No more should the poem be read lopsidedly as only an allegory of the poet's relation to the outside, "real" world. The literal meaning is as central as the "hidden" one in Tennyson's mind. Moreover, the intricacy of the poem with all its details reflects some depth of thought in Tennyson often overlooked by his critics as well as some artistic craftsmanship often underrated. Furthermore, the allegory seems to have suited Tennyson's temperament. He might have found in it some comfort in, if not a final resolution of, his personality crisis. Or, was it a way of escape?

(31) *Ibid.*, pp. 153-54.

(32) *A Shortened History of England* (1942; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 456.

(33) *Ibid.*, p. 457.

سيده شالوت : نظرة جديدة

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ملخص البحث. لقد طغى التفسير المجازي لقصيدة تنيسون «The Lady of Shalott» على الجوانب الأخرى للقصيدة ذات العلاقة بأمور وقضايا كانت على جانب كبير من الأهمية في العصر الفكتوري، كقضية المرأة والوضع الاقتصادي. وعلى هذا، تهدف الدراسة إلى إعادة التوازن إلى القصيدة، وذلك بالتركيز أولاً على الجانب المتعلق بالمرأة حيث يتبين أن البلوغ الجنسي عند المرأة، كما يرى تنيسون، يشكل عنصراً فعالاً ومنتفجراً في نموها حيث تتحول بعد ذلك إلى التمرد المتسرع على التقاليد، مما يؤدي إلى وفاتها. وفي ضوء هذا التفسير التاريخي يكتسب التفسير المجازي تفاصيل مهمة وبخاصة عندما يؤخذ الجانب الآخر من بيئة السيدة بعين الاعتبار، ذلك الجانب الذي يضم الطبقة الدنيا من المجتمع الفكتوري. وبهذا تتوضح الخيارات أمام السيدة الفنانة وتتوضح الصورة أمام القارئ.