

Forms of enclosure in
tennyson's "ulysses",
"the lady of shalott"
and "the palace..."



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Enclosure or entrapment is a prominent recurring mode throughout the poems of Alfred, Lord Tennyson. This essay largely focuses in the implementation and development of enclosure in *The Lady of Shalott* and then explores the relationships and diversity that is shared within other uses of forms of enclosure in the poems of *Ulysses* and *The Palace of Art*, drawing on critical readings that chart the development of this technique through Tennyson's career. It addresses the tacit nature with which all of the subjects in these poems accept their situation and the fragmentations of self that either lead to entrapment or their eventual liberation. In *The Lady of Shalott* the eponymous heroine is confined to a tower on a river-island, cursed to remain and weave beautiful images she gleans from a mirror. The entrapment in this poem is very literal and physical, as the Lady cannot leave her tower room due to some authoritative, albeit unexplained, mystical force; the Lady, however, appears content to continue her work: ' But in her web she still delights / To weave her mirror's magic sights.' Despite her happiness in her task, the poem is clear in stating that the sights are those of the mirror and not of the Lady, who actually has no personal hold on these experiences until the end of the second part of the poem where she first expresses discontent at her situation: "' I am half sick of shadows.'" Said / *The Lady of Shalott.*' (l. 71-72) A strong dichotomous relationship between the Lady and the outside world is established; Shalott and the tower become synonymous with immobility and a very static space, whereas the world on the banks of the river are shown to constantly change and move with different scenes described in each stanza from weddings to funerals. Even in this physically restrictive sense the Lady is trapped on this stationary plain, whilst the remaining world is free to move as far as and as quickly as it likes.

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Another clear distinction is that of monochrome versus vibrancy. The Lady of Shalott is surrounded by the gray walls of her tower whereas the real world presents rich colors and variation: " long-haired page in crimson clad." (l. 58) Yet through the Lady's mirror she weaves " A magic web with colors gay." The nature of Lady's entrapment is such that she is forced to embrace life's experiences via proxy, her creations are therefore the Lady's interpretation and recreation of reality. It is slavery to creation and to her art yet one the Lady of Shalott seems to actively participate in: ' She has heard a whisper say, A curse is on her if she stay To look down to Camelot. She knows not what the curse may be, And so she weaveth steadily.' (l. 39-43) This assumes an air of uncertainty on the Lady's part in which her grasp on her own curse is tenuous and, like all other experiences, received through extension: she " heard a whisper say". Much like in Palace of Art the state of entrapment is almost voluntary or tacit, an inner desire to achieve and perceive perfection within one's own capabilities or at the very least to remain where she is and to create. In Part 3 of The Lady of Shalott comes the Lady's rejection of imprisonment upon seeing and hearing Lancelot on the bank of the river. The image of Lancelot is overwhelming and can be seen as a visual parallel to the mirror the Lady uses to view the world. All of the descriptions of Lancelot seem to focus on his shiny armor and the light that is refracting or " glittering" from his adornments. It is when he " flashed into the crystal mirror" (l. 106) that the Lady abruptly leaves her work at the loom and her demise begins. With his " gemmy bridle" (l. 82), " blazoned baldric" (l. 87) and " silver bugle" (l. 88) Lancelot can be seen as almost wearing a mirror; as such the mirror moves according to Lancelot, indeed the armor can only replicate Lancelot's movements in much the same way that the Lady of

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Shalott replicates the scenes of the world the mirror presents her with.

Lancelot can also therefore be seen as being responsible for what light is reflected from his body as, again, it is dependent on his movement whereas the mirror the Lady has is static and merely reflects " Shadows of the world" (l. 48). Clyde de I. Ryals claims it is " when he sings... she realizes that song

is possible in the outside world, the call of the world becomes irresistible."

However, it is much more the visual than the auditory stimuli that acts as catalyst from contentment to rejection for the Lady of Shalott. The mirror at

her loom is the very symbol of her enclosure, consistent in presenting her

with shadows of the world, when Lancelot appears in her mirror he is no

shadow, he " flashed": " All in the blue unclouded weatherThick-jeweled

shone the saddle leather, The helmet and the helmet-featherBurned like one

burning flame together," (l 91-94). Lancelot is presented to her as what

reality actually is; he reflects strong, pure almost sensuous light directly from

his body and challenges the surrogacy of the shadows through which the

Lady is trapped to interpret and recreate reality. In the fourth part of the

poem, upon the Lady's flight from Shalott, a distinct disconnect is

maintained between the Lady and the outside world; on a very physical level

the Lady never actually touches the banks of the river but remains in the

boat, where she also maintains the monochrome purity of self " Lying, robed

in snowy white" (l. 136) in contrast to the vibrant crimsons and reds present

earlier in the poem, this development demonstrates an almost maturity of

freedom, where she accepts it but on her terms. The Lady does, however,

take the time to write her name on the boat in which she travels: in a

conscious and deliberate action she has affirmed and validated her identity.

Tennyson's poem Ulysses also clearly deals with a form of enclosure,

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ironically the entrapment of returning and remaining home. In this poem Tennyson has Ulysses lament his "freedom" to stay home and rule his land as he misses the excitement and diversity of a life of travel and warfare. Much like how *The Lady of Shalott* ends in the Lady affirming her identity Ulysses seems to be the discourse of a man whose identity has been lost or fragmented; Ulysses also seems consciously aware of a separation between the static and the moving, in the opening line he claims "It little profits that an idle king" (l. 1) On dealing with his identity, Ulysses sets up an environment where his identity is of question to everyone: "... I mete and dole Unequal laws unto a savage race, That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me." (l. 3-5) Ulysses claim that the race is "savage" suggests unfamiliarity or foreign agency and implies a feeling of apprehension towards them. His statement on the following line of "know not me" lends to a mutual unknowing between Ulysses and his people weakening his identity of Ulysses as king. This notion is bolstered in the small second stanza where Ulysses ruminates on his successor, Telemachus his son, and how he will be a fit ruler: "This is my son, mine own Telemachus, / To whom I leave the scepter and the isle". This is a ready and reflected statement full of intent on Ulysses part to abandon his rule and pass it on. His final statement of this stanza: "He works his work, I mine" seems the ultimate acknowledgement of Ulysses that his identity does not lie in king but in warrior and wanderer, a deliberate handing over of his role and a reinforcement that his "work" is not being done in his current state and that a relief of his duty will be the termination of his enclosure. Much of Ulysses' discontent seems to come from what used to be as opposed to what is, suggesting that he once regarded himself as a free man but, much like *The Lady of Shalott*, complied

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with his eventual enclosure. "... All times I have enjoyed Greatly, have suffered greatly, both with those The loved me, and alone; on shore, and when Through scudding drifts the rainy Hyades Vexed the dim sea." (l. 7-11) In the nature of the polarity of his anecdote it is evident that Ulysses lived a life of greatness. His sorrows and joys were of epic proportions: sometimes he was with a host of loving comrades and other times he was alone, even whether he was at sea or at land. The stark opposition set up in these lines shows the sincerity of Ulysses' lamentation if he yearns for the dire times as much as the great. In a story very similar to *The Lady of Shalott*, Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *The Palace of Art* is the story of a maiden, representative of Tennyson's artistic soul, living in solitude in a beautiful palace from which she can immerse herself in the varied experiences available to her in this palace: " Not these alone, but every landscape fair, / As fit for every mood of mind." Akin to the *Lady of Shalott*, the woman who inhabits Tennyson's palace is more than content to revel in the delights presented to her. There is an air of duty, much like in *The Lady of Shalott*, wherein the lady of *The Palace of Art* rejoices in her task of perfecting the artistic soul and assumes the role of the " hard, arrogant egotist who has chosen isolation because she feels superior to her fellow-beings" that suggests not only a compliance but a ready agreement in the necessity of her solitude: " O God-like isolation which art mine" (*The Palace of Art*, l. 193) Also, similar to the curse in *The Lady of Shalott*, unexplained is a notable element in *The Palace of Art*; one example is why the solitary maiden " throve and prosper'd; so three years / She prosper'd: on the fourth she fell." (l. 213 - 214). Unlike in *The Lady of Shalott*, the maiden in the palace does not revolt as the result of a singular experience or the presence of a particular lover but is the amalgamation of a

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life devoid of personal experience and “ human sympathy” (Lionel Stevenson, p. 133)In conclusion Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s poems The Lady of Shalott, Ulysses, and The Palace of Art deal with forms of enclosure in which the subjects readily accept and comply with their loss of control, development of scenario and their entrapment as a whole. This initial acquiescence eventually fragments and splinters in to a personal misery that leads to deliberate action to bring about a change of fate. Bibliography: Alfred, Lord Tennyson, ‘ The Lady of Shalott’ in The Norton Anthology English Literature, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006) l. 64-65. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, The Palace of Art, (London : Edward Moxon, 1853) l. 89 – 90. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, ‘ Ulysses’ in The Norton Anthology English Literature, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006). Clyde de L. Ryals, ‘ Poems of 1832’ in Theme and Symbol in Tennyson’s Poems to 1850 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1964) p. 74Lionel Stevenson, ‘ The “ High-born Maiden” Symbol in Tennyson’ in Critical Essays on the Poems of Tennyson ed by. John Killham (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1960) p. 133.