

"the lady of shalott":  
how tennyson sets  
the scene, and  
comments on an era



"The Lady of Shalott" was published in 1832, during the early Victorian epoch. It explores a series of themes that trigger the reader to question the societal prejudices that occurred during Queen Victoria's reign. In order to stimulate thought, Tennyson paints a romantic picture of Camelot and uses an array of literary techniques to lure the reader into the story. The idyllic scene at the beginning of the poem juxtaposed with the desolation that it concludes with, injects a surge of drama, which emphasises the weight of unanswered cerebral questions directed at the reader. Writers during this period were reliant on public opinion in order to encourage commercial enterprise, thus Tennyson appealed to the civilisation of his day. Some argue contemporary literary opinion turned sharply against him during the twentieth century, as his writings reflected Victorian values. Therefore, morals that can be identified in this text should be used as guidelines that expose the hypocrisy underlying the foundation of Victorianism.

The four stanzas in part one employ the same basic structure. There are nine lines with a rhyme scheme of aaaabcccb and Tennyson emphasises the rhyme, using it to his literary advantage. The abrupt stop at the end of the flowing structure constructs an archaic medieval atmosphere that clouds the reader's perception, forcing them into a dimension of ancient storytelling. Consequently reflecting the medieval theme of the poem and creating interest. One interpretation could suggest this mirrors the storyline of the Lady of Shalott, as her life concludes abruptly. Therefore the construction of the poem is a prophetic warning of the fate of the Lady of Shalott, demonstrating the vulnerability of women during the Victorian period, who were subject to the patriarchal values that underpinned civilisation. Susan

Kent observed, " Women were so exclusively identified by their sexual functions that nineteenth-century society came to regard them as ' the Sex' ". The polarised gender roles that men and women inhabited influenced the ideology of ' separate spheres.' This framework assigned conventional functions to men, such as ' courage, intellect, independence', while it attributed intrinsic feminine characteristics to women, ' emotional, sensitive, selfless'.

Tennyson adheres to this doctrine by placing the Lady of Shalott on a higher pedestal in the context of innocence. The first part of the poem constructs a serene and majestic tone, creating the impression that the Lady of Shalott is sacrosanct. ' Listening, whispers 'Tis the fairy Lady of Shalott.' The referral to the townsfolk's thoughts demonstrates the mythical nature of the Lady of Shalott, her existence seems enigmatic because of her involuntary confinement. A feminist interpretation would acknowledge the facade that surrounds the Lady. They might suggest that the whimsical and allegorical fantasy attached to her existence is a canvas that masks the true desolation of her incarceration. ' But who hath seen her wave her hand? Or at the casement seen her stand?' The rhetorical questions embed this apocryphal aspect of her identity and submerges the reader into a fictitious land of cyclical controversy.

The nature that surrounds the tower appears quaint and calm, creating the impression that Camelot is tranquil. This constructs suspense and dramatic irony, as it is not long before the mirage is shattered. Moreover, Tennyson employs pathetic fallacy to underline the future emotional turbulence the

Lady faces. ' Little breezes dusk and shiver Thro' the wave that runs for ever  
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By the island in the river' The personification of the breeze could enhance the Lady's feminine qualities. She is united with nature and this reflects qualities such as sensitivity and maternalism. Nature being associated with such characteristics can be traced back to Greek mythology. Gaia was the ancestral mother of all life and one of the Greek primordial deities.

Consequently, Tennyson is moulding the scene for the Lady to adopt the conventional position of a 'damsel in distress'. By accentuating her womanly persona, the reader will feel more inclined to wait in anticipation for her saviour.

'Round an island there below, The island of Shalott.' She lives on an island and castle, synecdochally described as 'Four gray walls, and four gray towers'. This could demonstrate the extremity of her imprisonment. It also suggests there is an alternate, darker paradigm concerning her lifestyle. While the walls overlook 'a space of flowers', the contrast of the outside world against her confinement emphasises the asperity of the state of her affairs. A marxist interpretation would use the surroundings as a metaphor for the the lady's social position. The tower is symbolic of psychological immurement and indoctrination from the state. However, one must note that her status is more inclined to be labelled as 'bourgeoisie'. This can be seen from the array of ornaments that inhabit the tower and her title as 'Lady'. Consequently, a Marxist interpretation would shift and suggest the failure to abide communism has resulted in chaos amongst the higher members of society. The fantasy of "The Lady of Shalott" projects a guiding light on Victorian society, warning them of an ill-fated future if they refuse to ignore the foundations of Communism. Although, it is important to bear in mind that

Marx began writing in 1844 and this poem was published in 1832. While the term was first coined in 1777 by Victor d'Hupay, who focused on the legacy of the Enlightenments to principles which he lived up to, it was Karl Marx and others who galvanised the movement.

The enigma of the lady manufactures apprehension and sparks curiosity. Tennyson fabricates a peaceful panorama, which allows him to vigorously assault the reader's lulled state later on and emphasise the austereness of the Lady's circumstance. This introduction sets the perfect scene for a tragedy and the articulate, meticulous use of literary techniques paints a visual image that allows a fusillade of emotions to be accessed, thus making the poem improbably engaging.