



A JOURNEY TOWARD IMMENSE LIGHT: A LACANIAN APPROACH TO *THE LADY OF SHALOTT*

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Abstract

The Lady of Shalott, a narrative poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson, which is written according to the Arthurian legend, regards the themes of loneliness, despair, and death within a bizarre context. The dismal mood and the tragic ending along with the emotional reaction of the lady give the poem deep psychological suggestions which make it distinct from other ballads. The poem embodies outstanding items like social and romantic relationships, art, seclusion, love, and death. It renders different layers of psychological implications which can be analyzed and interpreted according to Lacanian psychoanalysis. This article aims to demonstrate the implicit psychological aspects of the poem according to Lacanian principles in order to discover the profundity of the literary work.

Keywords: The Lady of Shalott, The Imaginary, The Other, The Real, The Symbolic, Death

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1. Introduction

Through an Arthurian legend, Tennyson in *The Lady of Shalott* regards the themes of loneliness, death, and despair. Although the objective narrative and the tragic ending accord with the style of ballad, there are deeper psychological implications in the poem which make it distinct from other English ballads. The poem does not cover the simple, straightforward tales of ballad in which a handsome knight is dead and eaten up by two ravens, for example, or a son murders a father without suggestion of details, but it embodies outstanding issues dealing with social and romantic life, art, seclusion, love, and death. Sedwick (1998) specifies this outstanding feature in Tennyson's poetry as merging old myth of traditional ballad with modern social issues and states that we see "the female subordination" turned in to "myth" and that Tennyson compels the reader to reinsert "myth in to history". (613) Thus, the poem incorporates several aspects at the same time and renders different layers of social and psychological features at once.

One outstanding feature about *The Lady of*

Shalott is that the poem is a counterpoint to the Arthurian legends in which king Arthur or Sir Lancelot is the male, active character and in which the whole story revolves around his actions. This poem focuses on life of a mysterious female isolate who is kept in a faraway, medieval setting in a tower. She can neither go outside, nor speak to strangers because she is cursed. *The Lady of Shalott*, likewise, contains remarkable and undeniable psychological dimensions that renders a hurt character in a crucial predicament, escaping from which is impossible. Poems like *The Lady of Shalott*, *Ulysses*, *Break*, and *Mariana* are examples of such characters and circumstances. As Cunningham (2001) notices this fact, "melancholy reigns over Victorian poetry" in general (323) and "the persisting sadness makes Tennyson perhaps the period's most melancholy man." (326) T. S. Eliot (1998) reminds the readers of profundity of Tennyson's theme of grief and writes "by working innocently at the surface, we are most likely to come to the depth, to the abyss of sorrow". (627) The passivity of the characters, their despair, the static world they live in, their regret for the past, and, above all, death are themes that are embedded in these poems.

This paper aims to demonstrate the

psychoanalytical dimensions of *The Lady of Shalott* according to Lacanian principles in order to discover the profundity of it contrary to the seemingly simple story it narrates.

2. The Imaginary and the Other

Though the Lady of Shalott is an adolescent, there are several indications in the poem which reveal that she does not belong to the symbolic phase. As Gribble (1983) declares, the lady in this curse is represented as to be "cut off, by class or sex or by sensibility, from the very world in which significance must be discovered, and ultimately, of being condemned by, and to, irrevocable condition of mortality" (139). The trap she is in does not let her to enter the symbolic. Armstrong (1993) also notes this failure to enter the symbolic by stating that in the poem, there is a "the radical disjunction of the symbolic which constitutes the social order of the law" that expresses "rigid opposition" in the society. (81) The lady was prevented to enter the symbolic order of signifiers by force, and hence, owns childlike qualities like innocence and non-lingual existence; yet her position as an adolescent, literate, and skilful woman in weaving underpin her post-imaginary being, frozen up by force of the symbolic. In other words, she neither lines in her imaginary nor in the symbolic. Fredric Jameson (2007), likewise, does not identify the two as separate in Lacan. He says "to speak to the imaginary independently of the symbolic is to perpetuate the illusion that we could have a relatively pure experience of either ... it will become increasingly difficult to form a notion of the Symbolic Order as same pure syntactic web, which entertains no relationship to individual subjects at all." (350)

Not allowed to look outside the window, this lonesome artist, symbolically, looks into a mirror to find the pattern of her weavings but not let to watch Camelot. "A curse is on her if she stay/ To look down to Camelot." (L S, line 41) Everything is actively in motion and life goes on in the mirror:

There she sees the highway near
Winding down to Camelot;
There the river eddy whirls,
And there the surly village churls,
And the red cloaks of market girls,
Pass onward from Shalott.

(L S, line 49-54)

Lancelot's image in the mirror "makes a fascination and delight" (King 2001: 114) in the Lady of Shalott's heart and it is she who "recognizes... herself in the other... and finds her future 'ideal ego' " (ibid 115). The image is substituted for all vague and shadowy images in the mirror and for Lady of Shalott, this is the first time she "develop[s] an awareness of environment and the external world..." (Homer 2005: 21).

This awareness prepares her for a new phase in her life when she looks at the window to see Camelot and Lancelot:

"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."

(L S, line 109-113)

Looking at Camelot and watching Lancelot puts an end to her pre-symbolic order. After breaking the spell, she leaves toward the world of Camelot initiating a new phase. She has found her object of desire and her 'other' in the image in the mirror.

Lancelot in the mirror is the other through whom the Lady of Shalott discovers herself and the other. This is the identification of the subject and the object. The lady has to choose between her "being" and "meaning" (Glowinsky 2001: 9) and since she chooses the other over her alienated self and sacrifices her life, she chooses the dominance of meaning and renounces her being. The Lady of Shalott begins her journey by riding a boat:

And down the river's dim expanse
Like some bold seer in a trance,
Seeing all his own mischance with a glassy countenance
Did she look to Camelot.
(LS, line 126-131)

3. Das Ding and The Real

From the beginning, the lady knows her fate. Neither is the journey accomplished successfully,

nor does it give her a chance for life: There is only one outcome: death. According to Zupančič (2003), action and desire are directly related and the aim of Lacan is finding "an absolute antinomy between the signifying order and the realm of *juissance*" which the Lady of Shalott is experiencing. (173-174). As Slinn (1991) states "within the Tennysonian present, completion and fulfillment are not possible." (64) Also, interpreting Lacanian absence, he states that "in an obvious sense the desire for unity ... is the desire for the death of the self. (ibid 65) The Lady of Shalott renounces the signifying order to achieve a perfect order beyond the symbolic. She tries to get an access to the real, the third Lacanian order without experiencing the symbolic. According to Lacan (1992), "the real is that which remains in its place and was apposed to both the imaginary and the symbolic". (82) She never gains an experience about social life, neither does she meet or speak to people, nor does she enjoy the beauties of nature; therefore, not experiencing the symbolic, she selects the real immediately.

Suddenly, in part IV in the poem there is a shift in time from summer to autumn. Storm, "wind", "pale yellow woods", "complaining streams", "low sky raining", all demonstrate a drastic change in the lady's life. She rides a boat, writes her name on it, lays in it in the evening, ready to die. In fact, desire leads her to death, to the realm of the real in search of *das ding*, or lost object of desire. As Homer (2005) puts it "*juissance* is absolute and certain and the symbolic is governed by death drive. Death is the beyond of pleasure, the inaccessible, the forbidden". (89-90) Since "the core of the real that is missing from the symbolic" is *das ding*, (Ibid 84) This journey moves toward death, other than to Lancelot or to Camelot and the lady decides to achieve *juissance* in order to put an end to her monotonous and boring life.

The break of the spell equals death which Tennyson depicts dramatically like a ritual. Through her ritual journey, The lady goes in search of '*das ding*', the lost object. Since '*das ding*' is associated with 'the real', the object here is not Lancelot and Tennyson gives no description about the appearances of the knight. The knight appears through a vague, luminous light that is both undeniable and indescribable. Lancelot is associated with light in so far as his image and visage could not be identified. There is no description about his face or his body, but merely the shining shield "The sun came dazzling thro' the leaves/and flamed upon the

brazen greaves/ of bold Lancelot." Or "The gemmy bridle glitter'd free/ like to some branch of stars we see/ Hung in the golden Galaxy." Or "The helmet and the helmet feather/ Burn'd like brining flame together/ As he rode down from Camelot." (*The Lady of Shalott*, lines 75-104) The sparkling shield, thick-jeweled saddle leather, burning helmet depict the blinding light, but not Lancelot himself. The new realm is the realm of glaring light devoid of the worldly signifiers of the symbolic. Lancelot is only a shadow of a knight's perfection. In other words, the Lady of Shalott falls in love with knighthood, that is a perfect image of a man. Of course, she cannot attain this perfection, '*objet petit a*', and constant state of satisfaction in the symbolic. As Rabate (2001) states the central concept in Lacan, *juissance*, the "excessive, perverse, murderous enjoyment he calls *juissance*", can only be achieved in the real. (27) and so the Lady is in search of the perfection in the real. The light that is radiated from Lancelot's helmet, shield, and horse signify something unknown and mysterious associated with the real description of which is impossible.

4. Signifiers and the Real

Though the real is indescribable and unknown, there are signifiers in the poem which indicate the overtones pertinent to this realm. The light that was associated with Lancelot was one instance of these signifiers. There are other signifiers which attempt to clarify the mystified real. As another signifier, repetition is a crucial concept in psychoanalysis which functions as the framework of the poem. It can be found in both form and content of this poem. Repetition is not only manifestd in the Lady of Shalott's weaving, but in Lancelot's appearance, his horse riding and the light attached to him when he crosses the lady's tower. The pattern of the poem, which is based on nine line stanza rhyming *aaaabcccb*, also the regular rhyme scheme, and its meter, and also recurrent internal rhymes all insinuate repetition in the poem. Moreover, The rhyming of Camelot and Shallot in all nineteen stanzas in lines five and nine (excepting part III stanza one where Shalott rhymes with Lancelot) pairs an incongruous couple. The symbolic is the world of signifiers and all signifiers intent is to hide death, something always missing and always present in this phase. The man the Lady of Shalott falls in love with is always absent and out of her reach and also is attached to repetition; therefore, is equivalent to death: his frequent coming and going away, his frequent reflections in the mirror, and his absence

from the lady's world make him equal to death. Likewise, according to Lacan (1992), the reality principle is a prolongation of pleasure principle (21) and that is what the lady longs for.

Art is another major signifier in the poem. The Lady's job is to create artistic works which we honor. But the lady is tired of the repetition of making crafts. Her art, based on repetition and restriction, includes no creativity. Stockstill (2012) states that her art is only "proliferating the knowledge and power of patriarchy through her discursive production of weaving" (15) and according to Fletcher (2007), the lady "sacrifices both life and art" through what she does. (494) Artistic works are signifiers the signified of which is usually hidden and sometimes missing. Lady's repetitive art hints to something absent, but crucial. The art of weaving also denotes the first woman's job, Eve, who was totally alone in a world much more restrictive, compared to where she came from originally. Eve wished to return to the glory and perfection of Eden and this is what the Lady of Shalott wishes, too: a transition to the *das Ding* which is the perfect state of enjoyment. The female being making something is a signifier of something lost in her world. The signified is missing from her world, but she is coveting it.

Mirror is another signifier which refers to something out of the tower's territory. For the Lady of Shalott, it is the only linking device between the inside and the outside world. The reflection of things, not the lady herself on the mirror, reveals the Other's attractions to her. The mirror, however, is a threat to her artistic creation. It is the transitional device between the lady's post-imaginary and the symbolic mode. In other words, it is through this mirror that the lady realizes a new order. Via this mirror stage the lady discerns her own self from the other's and finds the object of her desire: "He flash'd into the crystal mirror"(Line 106). The force of the mirror and the temptation of the glowing knight struggle with the power of the artistic job, but immediately she chooses to leave the web "she left the web, she left the loom, she made three paces thro' the room." (Line 110-111)

The lady knows her choice means death. As Lacan (1992) puts it, "We do not believe in the object, but we observe desire", the object is not important as the desire and the lady chooses desire. (10) "The mirror crack'd from side to side; 'The curse is come upon me', cried the lady of Shalott." The signified of reflection in the

mirror and also weaving is death which she does not wait for anymore, but chooses voluntarily "Down she came and found a boat/ Beneath a willow left afloat".

Choice of colors and the song she sings are suggestive, too. When she begins to join the real, she is associated with light, she wears a white gown "A cloud white crown of pearl she dight/ All raimented in snowy white" The color white is chosen by the lady to associate and accord herself with the source of light, which is radiated from Sir Lancelot. Robed in snowy white, she begins to sing "Heard a carol, mournful, holy,/ Chanted loudly, chanted lowly" the mood of her song contrasts extremely with the joyful, worldly, and whimsical 'terra Lirra' of Lancelot. Her song is tuned not for Lancelot, but for the ritual of death, which needs a mournful, holy song. The word holy connects the lady with a new realm out of the 'terra Lirra' of the symbolic. It is the celebrated junction, the link between the symbolic and the real. Her journey toward death is finished, her desire is fulfilled and settled, and she is liberated from the tedious cycle of repetitions and chooses the perfect signified: death.

At Camelot, people ask about her identity "who is this? And what is here?" Her identity and her action are mysterious and unknown for people. As Rowlinson (2007) puts it " ... she remained unseen, but in death, her mute corpse appears to the public gaze." (64) Lying with her white clothes in a boat raises questions because she does not belong to either the imaginary or the symbolic which they know, but to an unknown realm which puzzles them.

5. Conclusion

The symbols and motifs within the poem remarkably correspond to the mysterious world the lady moves toward. The symbol of light, first glowing from the knight and afterwards from the lady herself indicate the grotesque and unknown quality of another realm. This Lancelot in the mirror is paradoxically different from the down-to-earth and worldly Lancelot at the end of the poem. The Lancelot in the mirror is a projection of her ideal image of perfection appearing vaguely through light and glowing. It is only through death, then, that she can join that perfection. Tennyson, in fact, rendered a great psychoanalytical codes of a repressed Victorian woman who tries to release herself from the oppression of the symbolic by joining the real. Figuratively, this is the only way she could escape the prison of patriarchy.

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