

Tennyson's Poems "The Lady of Shalott" and "Mariana" Represent Fallen Women of Victorian Period

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ABSTRACT

The Victorian Age marked an era where a rise of oppositional creations ruled literary and social exemplifications of gender. These new rules divided men and women into two distinct worlds in which they performed different roles. While men were able to go about their business and indulge in politics in public, women faced exclusion from any social and public participation. The ideal woman in the Victorian Age had to stay at home, lack any sexual initiative, be selfless, and be morally accountable. She was to be the pillar of the home in both the physical and moral sense. Femininity during the Victorian Age was secondary to masculinity. The submission of women to men represented the enduring feature of the Victorian Age. A woman, deemed as a fallen one, showed signs of disregard of the set norms, expressed sexual aggressiveness, and ignored the need to be submissive to the men in her life (Gilmour 18). The theme of a fallen woman became a popular topic in literary circles during this age. In my paper, I will use these two poems to explain a number of strategies that had utilization by the Victorians to treat women and their sexuality. The center of my discussion is the establishment of Victorian views of fallen women and the way the text endorses or condemns conventional Victorian views. Do they support or challenge these views? Moreover, the essay would illustrate how these two poems represent the fallen women of the Victorian society who deviated from the feminine virtue of their society.

Specific ideologies regarding the characteristics of women and their role in society marked the Victorian Era. In this age, the ideal woman was to be pure and free of any sexual aggression. Their primary role in society was to be a homemaker. She was completely isolated from public life, which was primarily a man's domain. While the men were active participants in social life, women were not to participate in any kind of social life since there was a belief that it would taint their pure virtue (Lawrence 22). This idea of the ideal Victorian woman was widely witnessed in various literary works of the Victorian Age. Alfred Lord Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" gives an honest account of the divide that existed between men and women in terms of their roles during the Victorian Age. In the poem, Tennyson utilizes both the exterior and interior space to illustrate the idea of an isolated woman. The poem contains such vivid and powerful representations of fallen women during the era that it influenced a movement of absorbed artistes who thrived upon the idea of a sheltered woman (Wilbur 67).

In various ways, the poem "The Lady of Shalott" emphasized on the idea of the restrained woman in the Victorian Age. Even though the title of the poem alludes to the fact that it will center upon the woman character, Tennyson places emphasis on the natural surroundings of the poem. Additionally, he focuses his attention on the exterior and interior environment of the woman rather than the lady herself. He demonstrates the seclusion of the Victorian woman using her physical environment by conflicting the prison that confines her and the external surroundings of Camelot. The poem represents the isolated Victorian woman as a submissive person that has agreed to her place in the home by running errands such as weaving: "She weaves by night and day/a magic web with colors gay" (Tennyson Stanza II, Line 45).

"The Lady of Shalott" demonstrates the ideals of the Victorian Age on how men and women faced division regarding public and private life. The tower in which the lady is a prisoner portrays a domestic environment that allows her to play her feminine role of weaving. Conversely, outside and beyond the window lies Camelot, which represents the masculine public world dominated by men, notably Sir Lancelot. Although Tennyson places the setting of the poem in a feudal system, it still possesses the values, norms, and the principle of the Victorian age. The lady in the tower gets the portrayal of the ideal Victorian woman with an untainted, appropriate and housebroken presence. Similar to her, most women of the Victorian age had to partake in only their domestic duties and not engage in life beyond the walls of their homes. Her gender, her domesticated fate, and her act of weaving all represent Tennyson idea of an ideal woman of the Victorian age (Tennyson and Roberts 34).

The use of fairytale motifs in "The Lady of Shalott" is an attempt to present the Rapunzel ideal that a girl in the domesticated situation must accept the constraints placed on her by society. She must accept her restrained position without any rebellion. "The Lady of Shalott" is not rebellious to her domestic duty of weaving but instead suppresses her feelings in order fit into the role of the ideal Victorian woman. Tennyson does not provide options for the lady for her liberation. She faces entrapment in the tower, and any attempt to escape will have grave consequences. The irony is that she will exchange one entrapment for another if she tries to avoid; that is her death. In this regard, Tennyson divulges his personal opinions on women. This is evident through his act of equating womanhood with seclusion by placing a domesticated woman on the tower instead of a male (Gilmour

52). Consequently, underpinning conservative Victorian views on gender roles.

The secluded “The Lady of Shalott” resides in a world of darkness. The only way in which she can view the outside environment is via a magical mirror, which represents her separation. The mirror does not show her reflection but rather the shadows of others. This aspect exemplifies her desire to be involved in the social activities of the outside world as well as her dependency on the outside environment. The lack of her reflection is deliberate and refers to the view that she does not exist in the outside world. In her prison, she witnesses all the things that she cannot experience but would very much like to experience. These include the Knights, the lovers, the shepherd, and the girls at the market. The sight of the newlywed lovers incites feelings of rebellion from the lady, and she exclaims, “I am half sick of shadows” (Poulson 26). It is apparent that it is the social institution of marriage that incites in the lady a desire to attain love and move away from the life of shadows.

By leaving the interior world and entering, the exterior world of men the lady makes a decision to cross the gender lines. The lady's actions appear to be progressive but have a greater motive of desire to find marriage. Tennyson is not in any ways challenging Victorian ideas, but he is rather reinforcing them. Arguably, Tennyson partook in the writing of “The Lady of Shalott” as a response to the political atmosphere that existed during that time. Nonetheless, it is apparent that Tennyson emphasizes on the anxieties that single Victorian women went through thus creating feelings of insecurity within the lady. This is a reminder of the fact that the lady is becoming a fallen woman. The second half of Tennyson gives a precise description of his views about the roles of Victorian women. This is when he administers the punishment of death to his female protagonist. It is only after the woman gazes into the public that she receives a curse from Camelot. Consequently, death is the punishment for this fallen woman who chose to break the Victorian ideals and look into public space (Hartley 39). The fallen woman shows defiance by making the transition from the private and feminine space to the public and masculine space. The punishment of death is Tennyson's stern warning to women of the Victorian age to remember the place or risk the punishment of death. The fate of “The Lady of Shalott” comes to fruition when she touches land. Consequently, her journey to the social life of public life remains incomplete due to her premature death: “For ere she reached upon the tide/The first house by the water-side/Singing in her song she died (Tennyson Stanza II.Lines150-153).”

For gazing at Sir Lancelot, the “Lady of Shalott” becomes a fallen woman and receives the punishment of death. The expectations of the typical Victorian woman were to remain pure and virginal and keep her place according to the prescribed gender roles; however, the lady swayed from these ideas. In the same manner, Victorian women who chose to rebel against the gender roles assigned by society were quickly banished by the society as a whole. In this respect, Tennyson's “Lady of Shalott” represents a fallen Victorian

woman who faces stigmatization for not following the conventional Victorian ideals. Tennyson portrays her as mad in a bid to hide the fact that there are problems in his society in general (Tennyson and Roberts 56).

In his poem “Mariana” Tennyson attempts to review and challenge a common male literary custom by taking cue from another writer, namely Shakespeare, and putting a minor female character as the main protagonist in his poem. This is may be viewed as a way for Tennyson to display his feminist side. This is confirmed by the manner in which he presents an eccentric type of womanhood in “Mariana” that seems to be challenging the inflexible gender ideals of the Victorian age. From the onset, Mariana embodies characteristics of the typical fallen Victorian woman who has rejected the ideals of the gender roles designed by the Victorian age (D'Amico 42). It becomes apparent to the reader that she is not married to any man and that her lover had left her. Additionally, she ultimately leaves the farmhouse she lives in a complete mess. Unlike in the Shakespeare version of events where she eventually marries her lover, in the poem the lover never comes back. Tennyson portrays Mariana as a fallen Victorian woman by making sure she is not married and is not in any way virginal. This is during the Victorian era where any form of sexual behavior outside marriage for a woman came under condemnation as sinful and unconventional. The fallen woman came under stigmatization as a danger to the concept of womanhood. Sexuality for a woman was not only condemned and stifled outside marriage but within it. The expectations of women were to be asexual and display a bigger measure of maternal instinct (Gilmour 44). Consequently, Mariana is a fallen Victorian woman because of not being married and due to her sexual activities as a single woman. Mariana's role as a fallen Victorian woman and her unconventionality had further expression when she made awake at night by a pitch darkness that blackens even the waters. In the Victorian age, it was commonplace to make a connection between a woman's sexuality and darkness. This, therefore, is Tennyson's attempt to introduce the reader to Mariana's sexual aggressiveness. In many works of literature, the fallen Victorian woman has a description of being the dark sad one or the one that is not fair. Evidently, Mariana is not happy, and she does declare this to the reader when she proclaims, “life is dreary.” (Tennyson Line 9) Consequently, Tennyson attempts to make a connection between Mariana and darkness is clear evidence that she is an example of Victorian fallen woman.

Contrary to the norm in the Victorian age where the housekeeping was the chief duty of a woman, Mariana neglects her farmhouse. She does not manage the house from both a moral and physical view. This is a rejection of the Victorian ideals of gender roles. Mariana's reluctance to uphold her domestic duties lie in the fact that she has no husband to come to her farmhouse at the end of a day. Additionally, the bodily rot that is evident in her house is suggestive of the moral negligence in her home. The poem opens to his disrepute: With blackest moss the flower-plots/Were thickly crusted, one and all/The rusted nails fell from the knots/That held the pear to the gable

wall./The broken sheds looked sad and strange (Tennyson Lines 1-5). There is suggestion that the setting may be a reflection of the inner troubles that hound Marianna and not her sexual misadventures. However, the actual reason behind the dilapidated nature of the house lies in Marianna's sexual misconduct. She represents the typical fallen Victorian woman whose source of power appears more of a *femme fatale* who is not able to exhibit skills of the domestic nature (Richards 49). The flower pots that now contain black moss are a symbol of her role as the fallen Victorian woman. The sheds that have broken and now appear strange are a reflection of Mariana's unconventional behavior that has challenged the ideal Victorian view of womanhood. Tennyson consistently utilizes dark imagery in the poem to illustrate the level of Marianna's transgressions. She is not able to "...look on the sweet heaven" (Tennyson Line 15), and this illustrates that she is neither angelic nor virginal.

Mariana's relationship with the setting and the landscape connects to her position as a fallen Victorian woman. There exists more than just a projection of Mariana's mood to the surrounding. The landscape and Mariana join in harmony to express Mariana's point of view. From the look of things, the poem appears to have Mariana as its main speaker since everything in her house gets a description as observed by Mariana. However, even though there exist similarities between Mariana's emotions, and the landscape there exists some stark dissimilarities. Tennyson makes this clear by the four lines at the end of each verse, which serves to explain that Mariana and her landscape are not totally in harmony (Tennyson and Roberts 76).

Mariana's words, which are a reflection of her mental state, remain in a position of immobility. They continuously repeat, and this refers to not only her immobility in this lonely circumstance but also her passive womanhood. In this regard, the act of repeating her words reestablishes the same gender stereotypes of the Victorian age that Tennyson was trying to combat by making her the main protagonist. Her position as a fallen Victorian woman brings her much sadness from within. The primary cause of this being the lack of her lover, and it is evident that her happiness lies in the arrival of the lover. Her desire to marry or die is complementary to the ideal notions of womanhood in the Victorian age (Gilmour 31). Most women of that time had little or no alternative to marriage. Marriage and partaking in domestic duties were their ultimate goal in life. Mariana does not get married when she finally realizes that he will not be coming back soon. The moral motive in the poem lies in the desire for solidity, home satisfaction, and social acceptability. Therefore, even though Mariana represents the archetypal Victorian fallen woman, she is more orthodox than sinful. Mariana does not come to this realization and is never aware of any alternative other than death and marriage. This lack of aggression against the Victorian ideals of gender roles is indicative of Tennyson's personal view that women belong in the privacy of the domestic setup and not the rigors of public life (Lawrence 29).

The recurring image in the Victorian age is that of an encircled family setting. This enclosed nature of the family

provided shelter from the confusion and chaos of the time. Therefore, an individually created miniscule perfection did not exist in the overall society. Similarly, Mariana portrays this image of being enclosed and out of reach in search of peace from all the chaos and loneliness, which marks her real life. This is well documented by the variation that lies between her spoken words and the descriptions that Tennyson gives of the natural world around her. However, her enclosed life may also be a reference to protection. The house she lives in and which she has abandoned serves as a cage. This emotional shelter could either destroy her or create a new destiny for her (Richards 46).

In "Mariana," Tennyson dominates the poem with circular images that give an illustration that Mariana is a prisoner in her repetitive thoughts. Her relationship with her absent lover has both exploited and frustrated her. The absence of her lover has made it completely impossible for her to fit into the ideal Victorian role of a woman. This is because, in Victorian mindset, it is for the sake of a man that a woman makes sure that the house is tidy, and that all domestic duties are undertaken (Gilmour 11). Therefore, her lack of satisfaction with the absence of her love is the catalyst for her position as a fallen Victorian woman.

In conclusion, the idea of the fallen Victorian woman was a common element of most writers of the Victorian age. This paper has been able to explain a number of strategies that had application by the Victorians to treat women and their sexuality. The center of its discussion was to establish Victorian views of fallen women and the way the poems endorse or condemn conventional Victorian views. Both poems, "The Lady of Shalott" and "Mariana," have in their way both challenged the Victorian views and in some instances supported them. Moreover, the essay has illustrated how these two poems represent the fallen women of the Victorian society who deviated from the feminine virtue of their organization. Tennyson's own personal view crept up in most of his works, and that was not different in his poems, "The Lady of Shalott" and "Mariana." In both of them, the women he portrayed were in all their characteristics fallen Victorian women. In his flawed view that had a bias to the gender roles that the Victorian society created, he portrayed the women to have fallen into sin by challenging the Victorian ideals of femininity.

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