

# The Lady of Shalott

Pre-Raphaelite Representations of the Poem by  
Alfred, Lord Tennyson

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Lord Alfred Tennyson's poem "The Lady of Shalott" has been a great inspiration for many Pre-Raphaelite artists. Pre-Raphaelites greatly delighted in medieval legends. Set within the realm of Arthurian literature, the Lady's mysterious and lonely story is that of a woman cursed to remain in a tower and endure the consequences of a desired but forbidden affection. "The Lady of Shalott" presents a commentary of Victorian women, in which their gendered and assigned roles were that of domesticity and suppression. Though their lives were tainted, a romanticized and idealized representation of them remained and was expressed through artwork. Additionally, there was much debate during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century over the union of painting and poetry. Tennyson sought to celebrate life and death, reality and spirit, and the necessity of love in human experience.<sup>1</sup> Artists such as William Holman Hunt and John William Waterhouse depicted the Lady as a glorified, tragic heroine, and similar to a "femme fatale," whereas Elizabeth Siddal depicted the Lady as a more realistic "femme covert" who was suppressed by Victorian society, which was reflected in Siddal's own experiences.

"The Lady of Shalott" takes place on an isolated island where the Lady is forbidden to look outside her window to the world of opportunity. The Lady only sees the world through a mirror of shadows, and from this reflection, she weaves a tapestry. The Lady is cursed to solitary confinement for reasons unknown, and she yearns for real experience.<sup>2</sup> It is later known that the curse the Lady suffers under is

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<sup>1</sup> Edgar F. Shannon, Jr., "Poetry as Vision: Sight and Insight in "The Lady of Shalott"," *Victorian Poetry* 19.3 (1981): 208.

<sup>2</sup> Jan Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women: Images of Femininity* (New York: Harmony Books, 1988), 23.

that of original sin – the sin of pain and death manifested upon all of humanity.<sup>3</sup> The Lady experiences a burst of insight into the real world, as is from blindness; this occurs in various stages of perception. The tale of “The Lady of Shalott” became a concept instead of an archetype, and in fact became a notable romantic idiom and catch-phrase.<sup>4</sup>

*The Lady of Shalott*, having been started around 1886, was William Holman Hunt’s last and greatest work, as it was completed in 1905 when his eyesight began



Figure 1: William Holman Hunt, "The Lady of Shalott", 1886. Retrieved April 3, 2011, from: ARTstor database.

to fail. Hunt depicted the fatal moment when the Lady sees the reflection of Sir Lancelot in the mirror and looks out the window to see him. The tapestry unravels and the mirror cracks, as she has broken her vow to uphold the curse (Figure 1).<sup>5</sup> The mirror is a symbol of the projection of the self, so the fact that it cracked means that a new identity could be unveiled for the Lady – one filled with the comprehension of love, both human and spirit.<sup>6</sup> A series of

visual puns litter this painting, such as ‘coming undone’, ‘moral loosening’, and

<sup>3</sup> Shannon, Jr., “Poetry as Vision,” 216.

<sup>4</sup> Lynne Pearce, *Woman/Image/Text: Readings in Pre-Raphaelite Art and Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991): 71.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Wood, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (New York: The Viking Press, 1981), 109.

<sup>6</sup> Shannon, Jr., “Poetry as Vision,” 215.

'letting one's hair down'.<sup>7</sup> What the audience is witnessing is an emergence of sexuality. It's no accident that the tip of Lancelot's spear is piercing through one of the loops of the weaving, which serves as another visual pun. In addition, his name "Lance-a-lot" serves as a play on words. The spear enters her realm, referring to sexual release and contrasting with the dull tower, which protected the sterility of her personal life.<sup>8</sup>

In the background of Hunt's representation of "The Lady of Shalott," reliefs of the Virgin and Child, Hercules in the Garden of Hesperides, and friezes of cherubs depict religious and mythological symbolism. Hunt wanted to portray the Lady's life as engulfed in moral earnestness to show that religious faith was a key element of her character.<sup>9</sup> The Lady's neck is pointed toward the image of Lancelot, which shows that she made her choice to reject a life of religious celibacy.<sup>10</sup> In addition to this, Hunt illustrated discarded sandals, modeled after the *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* (1434) by Jan Van Eyck, to depict walking on sacred ground, as well as birds flying away to symbolize her freedom.<sup>11</sup>

The moment chosen by Hunt was a common choice for Pre-Raphaelite artists in that it is the most dramatic – the moment when the Lady is condemned to die.<sup>12</sup> This depiction calls upon the passage:

She left the web, she left the loom,

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<sup>7</sup> Richard L. Stein, "The Pre-Raphaelite Tennyson," *Victorian Studies* 24.3 (1981): 294.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

<sup>9</sup> Wood, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 109.

<sup>10</sup> Stein, "The Pre-Raphaelite Tennyson," 294.

<sup>11</sup> Sharyn R. Udall, "Between Dream and Shadow: William Holman Hunt's "Lady of Shalott"," *Woman's Art Journal* 11.1 (1990): 37.

<sup>12</sup> Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, 24.

She made three paces thro' the room,  
 She saw the water-lily bloom,  
 She saw the helmet and the plume,  
 She look'd down to Camelot.

Out flew the web and floated wide;  
 The mirror crack'd from side to side;  
 "The curse is come upon me," cried  
 The Lady of Shalott.<sup>13</sup>

Tennyson expressed that he wanted the first part of this specific passage to be depicted, but the reason why is not certain.<sup>14</sup> However, Hunt insisted on illustrating the Lady's downfall, which deeply perturbed Tennyson.<sup>15</sup> It is not certain as to what the nature of the relationship was between Hunt and Tennyson, but Hunt's representation is the only one upon which Tennyson personally commented. Tennyson was perturbed by Hunt's insistence to portray this moment because the Lady would be frozen forever in a decision of defiance, which describes the Lady as a naïve yet rebellious seductress. This is not how Tennyson wished to portray her.<sup>16</sup> Hunt defended his actions by stating that he "had only half a page on which to convey the impression of weird fate, whereas you [Tennyson] use about fifteen pages to give expression to the complete idea."<sup>17</sup> Hunt's Victorian values may have enticed him to turn a suppressed woman into a glorified rebel and create a social commentary of his own.

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<sup>13</sup> "The Lady of Shalott by Alfred, Lord Tennyson," The Camelot Project at the University of Rochester, <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/shalott.htm> (accessed April 3, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Elaine Shefer, "Elizabeth Siddal's "Lady of Shalott"," *Woman's Art Journal* 9.1 (1988): 25.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>16</sup> Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, 25.

<sup>17</sup> Shefer, "Elizabeth Siddal's "Lady of Shalott"," 25.

William Holman Hunt depicted the Lady as a seductive woman entangled in the web of her unraveling tapestry with her hair messed wildly above her head. This rather dramatic representation was not condoned by Tennyson, who disapprovingly asked, “why was her hair wildly tossed about as if by a tornado?” and “why did you make the web wind round and round her like the threads of a cocoon?”<sup>18</sup> In this regard, Tennyson believed, “an illustrator ought never to add anything to what he finds in the text,”<sup>19</sup> stressing the importance of the painting as an imitation of literature. Firstly, Hunt was probably offended by Tennyson’s remarks because he had modeled the hair after Mrs. Amelia Milnes, which took three years to finish as he purposefully and carefully draped her hair over an easel for a windblown effect.<sup>20</sup> This representation of threads spiraling and hair loosening (long flowing hair being the symbol of female sensuality) illustrates the release of feminine energy.<sup>21</sup> Secondly, Hunt interpreted the poem as a fable illustrating the “failure of the human soul towards its accepted responsibility,”<sup>22</sup> therefore viewing the Lady’s response as a failure to accept the responsibility of original sin and her rebellion against it.

However, Hunt misinterpreted the poem in this sense, for the Lady accepted her fate: the curse of original sin had entered reality and became human.<sup>23</sup>

Tennyson stated his intended interpretation was that of “the new-born love for

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<sup>18</sup> D. S. R. Welland, *The Pre-Raphaelites in Literature and Art* (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1953), 210.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>20</sup> Wood, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 109.

<sup>21</sup> Udall, “Between Dream and Shadow,” 36.

<sup>22</sup> Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, 24.

<sup>23</sup> Shannon, Jr., “Poetry as Vision,” 216.

something, for someone in the wide world from which she has been so long secluded, takes her out of the region of shadows into that of realities.”<sup>24</sup> Hunt’s iconography illustrated moral disobedience and a conflict between good and evil,<sup>25</sup> but by being trapped inside the tower, the Lady could not have accepted the responsibility of original sin because she was shielded from its existence in the first place. Instead, she was opened up to the world of reality. More importantly, Hunt, overriding Tennyson’s wishes, wanted to depict the woman’s quintessential role and domestic duty of weaving as savagely destroyed by the power of the curse to show order exploding into chaos.<sup>26</sup>

Hunt was an individual and original artist with what some art historians describe as a “highly personal vision.” In fact, Hunt himself was rather lonely and isolated, causing him to identify with “The Lady of Shalott.” Psycho-biographical readings have been conducted regarding images of the Lady, and this has shown that the Lady’s failure often strikes a nerve in the personal lives of artists.<sup>27</sup> Some critics from the 1950’s even stated that the Lady’s tapestry was a manifestation of the problematic nature of an isolated artistic life.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, Hunt depicts the Lady much like himself, as she remains in her room while the consequences of her actions leave her momentarily paralyzed, looking down at the world of opportunity below.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Stein, “The Pre-Raphaelite Tennyson,” 293.

<sup>25</sup> Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, 24.

<sup>26</sup> Udall, “Between Dream and Shadow,” 36.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>28</sup> Jane Wright, “A Reflection on Fiction and Art in “The Lady of Shalott,”” *Victorian Poetry* 41.2 (2003): 288.

<sup>29</sup> Shefer, “Elizabeth Siddal’s “Lady of Shalott,”” 24.

John William Waterhouse was by far the most enigmatic of the Pre-Raphaelites and produced the most aesthetically appealing works. Waterhouse produced three separate painted versions of “The Lady of Shalott.” Waterhouse’s first depiction, titled *The Lady of Shalott*, was produced in 1888. It showed the Lady casting her boat off into the overgrown brush and backwater of the Thames, floating down toward Camelot with her tapestry web trailing in the water as she dealt with the consequences of her inevitable death.<sup>30</sup> Waterhouse’s first depiction played off of the following passage:

And at the closing of the day  
 She loosed the chain, and down she lay;  
 The broad stream bore her far away,  
     The Lady of Shalott.

Lying, robed in snowy white  
 That loosely flew to left and right--  
 The leaves upon her falling light--  
 Thro' the noises of the night  
     She floated down to Camelot:  
 And as the boat-head wound along  
 The willowy hills and fields among,  
 They heard her singing her last song,  
     The Lady of Shalott.

Heard a carol, mournful, holy,  
 Chanted loudly, chanted lowly,  
 Till her blood was frozen slowly,  
 And her eyes were darken'd wholly,  
     Turn'd to tower'd Camelot;  
 For ere she reach'd upon the tide  
 The first house by the water-side,  
 Singing in her song she died,

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<sup>30</sup> Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, 26.



The Lady of Shalott.<sup>31</sup>

Figure 2: John William Waterhouse, "The Lady of Shalott", 1888. Retrieved April 3, 2011, from: ARTstor database.

Loosening the chain and floating up to Camelot is symbolic of the Lady releasing herself from her previous bondage of illusion and into real time (Figure 2). The Lady floats down the river singing as she dies, and when at last Sir Lancelot greets her in death, he has no idea what he meant to her in life or that he caused her death. Ironically,

it was he who actually indirectly gave her insight, freeing her from social death during life.<sup>32</sup> Although the Lady had once perceived things through a mirror without grasping the meaning, now she passes through death and can rest assured that she will face eternal reality.<sup>33</sup> This willingness to subject herself to the unknown is a profound and sacred rite of passage from social death to social life. Although it leads her toward death in the physical realm, the Lady decided that taking her chances with physical death was better than enduring the social death she had in life. As she floats down the river of eternal death, the Lady's self-assertion to free herself from the curse and to empower faith within herself as an

<sup>31</sup> "The Lady of Shalott, by Alfred, Lord Tennyson"

<sup>32</sup> Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, 27.

<sup>33</sup> Shannon, Jr., "Poetry as Vision," 221.

individual and as a part of mankind was a powerful message not yet understood by Victorian standards.<sup>34</sup>

Waterhouse's *Lady* is illustrated with candles and a crucifix at the bow of the boat – two items which Tennyson would have condemned since they weren't mentioned in his poem. In addition to this, the *Lady* is seen as having taken the tapestry with her; moreover, it never unraveled in the first place and in fact survived, which is not true to the poem. Waterhouse defended his position by using Tennyson's own words against him: "art, even beyond the perception of the artist, speaks of reality and both can and must exist in a real world."<sup>35</sup> Waterhouse interpreted this as an approval of his depiction. Since, as Tennyson stated, art must exist in the real world, her tapestry entered reality at the same time as the *Lady* did.

However, Tennyson countered Waterhouse's illustration of the tapestry remaining. In the poem, the *Lady*'s tapestry was destroyed once she entered the real world because since the *Lady* created the tapestry from mirrored images, this form of art became removed from reality.<sup>36</sup> Weaving the web of tapestry from mirrored images portrayed art as imitation – a theory that was challenged during Tennyson's years.<sup>37</sup> Tennyson stated that realism in art asserts fiction in poetry and that the close relationships between artistry and realism should make an analogous visual reproduction of reality. Tennyson also stated that the artist's production can only display a present time in and of itself and that the artist's representation destroys the medium of poetry not to criticize it, but to prove redundancy once the

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>35</sup> Wright, "A Reflection on Fiction and Art in "The Lady of Shalott"," 289.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>37</sup> Shannon, Jr., "Poetry as Vision," 211.

real work it enables is separated from it. Because of this, art changes the nature of the object once it has been released from the process of production. Therefore, as the Lady died, her art was released.<sup>38</sup>

Waterhouse's second painting, titled *The Lady of Shalott* and finished in 1894, was similar to Hunt's composition in that it depicted the Lady in entangled threads. The powerful imagery of confinement and bondage was foretold by the poem's established tale of solitary confinement (Figure 3).

Interestingly, the bondage motif was

chosen despite Tennyson's claim that poetry expressed the dilemma in art, meaning that art was stuck between fantasy and reality. In other words, Waterhouse's bondage imagery is ironic in the fact that Waterhouse was unaware that Tennyson felt art itself was held in bondage, not poetry. This bondage motif doubles as a motif for the suppression and restraint of Victorian women, who were cursed by the double standard of sexuality and faced the consequences of religious imposition



Figure 3: John William Waterhouse, "The Lady of Shalott", 1894. Retrieved April 3, 2011, from: [www.jwwaterhouse.com](http://www.jwwaterhouse.com).

<sup>38</sup> Wright, "A Reflection on Fiction and Art in "The Lady of Shalott"," 289.



Figure 4: John William Waterhouse, "I am Half Sick of Shadows' said the Lady of Shalott", 1915. Retrieved April 3, 2011, from: [www.jwwaterhouse.com](http://www.jwwaterhouse.com).

*am Half Sick of Shadows' said the Lady of Shalott.* In this painting, Waterhouse elaborately illustrated the loom and focused on the Lady's gaze in the mirror, in which two young lovers are in the distance of Camelot (Figure 4). This depicts the passage:

But in her web she still delights  
 To weave the mirror's magic sights,  
 For often thro' the silent nights  
 A funeral, with plumes and lights  
     And music, went to Camelot:  
 Or when the moon was overhead,  
 Came two young lovers lately wed:  
 "I am half sick of shadows," said  
     The Lady of Shalott<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, 26.

<sup>40</sup> Marsh, *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>41</sup> "The Lady of Shalott by Alfred, Lord Tennyson"

The rejection of the shadowy sphere of assigned femininity, demonstrated by the approved domestic activity of weaving, illustrates ostracism and social death.<sup>42</sup> This is the moment when the Lady rejects complacently weaving all day, thereby remaining cut off from the opportunity that awaits just outside her window.

Elizabeth Siddal presented one of the earliest and most accurate depictions of “The Lady of Shalott.” In the male dominated Pre-Raphaelite movement, Siddal combated Victorian values and attitudes towards her roles as a woman and as an artist. The woman artist was depicted as a mere dabbler and painting itself was viewed as a hobby or even a luxury of the classes, but never something by which a woman could be taken seriously. Even statements by contemporary Pre-Raphaelite artists did not give credit to her ability, but rather focused superficially on her physical image: “a stupendously beautiful creature... a queen magnificently tall, with a lovely figure, a stately neck and a face full of the most delicate and finished modeling.”<sup>43</sup> Clearly, the visual representation of women took precedence over any belief in notable talent. And since “The Lady of Shalott” was a popular subject due to the notion of the romanticized Victorian woman as a victim, Siddal was forever influenced by the lack of respect from these men.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, 26.

<sup>43</sup> Shefer, “Elizabeth Siddal’s “Lady of Shalott”,” 21.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

Siddal augmented Victorian values of the suppression of women in her drawing *The Lady of Shalott*. Siddal portrayed the Lady seated at her loom in an awkward stance and gazing out the window to Lancelot (Figure 5).

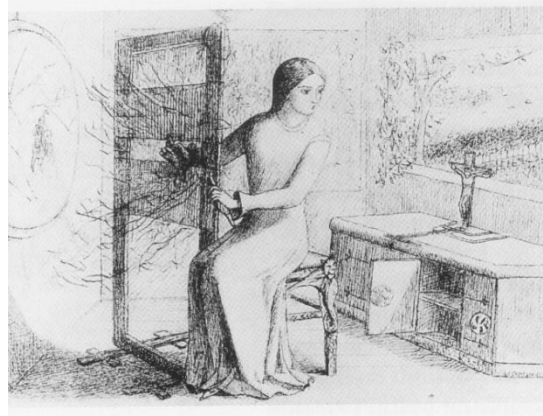


Figure 5: Elizabeth Siddal, "The Lady of Shalott", 1853. Retrieved April 3, 2011, from: [www.lizziesiddal.com](http://www.lizziesiddal.com).

Although probably the least aesthetically appealing of the Pre-Raphaelite representations, Siddal's is the most important when conveying the historical context of Victorian values. Like Hunt's and Waterhouse's second representations, Siddal's drawing also depicts the crucial moment when the Lady seals her tragic fate. Siddal's drawing remarkably contrasts with that of Hunt, in which Hunt depicted that same moment to be one of confusion, excitement, and disorder, whereas Siddal depicted the Lady as calmed, ordered, and quiet.<sup>45</sup>

Siddal's Lady shows the dichotomy of struggling between two worlds. The exterior world, symbolized by the mirror image of Sir Lancelot on the landscape, and the interior world, where she has been solidly placed because of her femininity, is juxtaposed. Siddal's Lady does not occupy the same space as Sir Lancelot, unlike Hunt's representation, meaning that Siddal offers a non-romanticized view of reality. This passage depicts the domestic suppression of a Victorian woman's world:

There she weaves by night and day  
A magic web with colours gay.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 25.

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,  
And little other care hath she,  
    The Lady of Shalott.<sup>46</sup>

This construction of the private, indoor domain for women, and the public, outdoor world of men was a very real part of Victorian values in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. As seen clearly in this representation, it is ironic that the Lady even looks out the window, because at first all she sees is Sir Lancelot's shadow, a mere reflection in her mirror, meaning that she took her chances on an image she didn't even know was truthfully real.<sup>47</sup>

Siddal carefully pursued the Victorian formula by portraying the Lady as gazing out the window past the crucifix. Although Tennyson might not have appreciated Siddal's addition of the crucifix, as also seen in Waterhouse's first depiction, this adds an element being ignored by the Lady: religion. As the Lady's hands carelessly finger the loom, Victorian audiences interpreted her gaze out the window to Lancelot as the fall of humanity in which the Lady conducted an act of moral disobedience. In fact, in Siddal's depiction, the Lady gazes past the crucifix, meaning that she does not care about the consequences of the curse. Instead, she longs for reality and tangibility. Since the focus is solely on the Lady, the Lady transforms into a mere object, which is also reflected in Victorian values.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> "The Lady of Shalott by Alfred, Lord Tennyson"

<sup>47</sup> Shefer, "Elizabeth Siddal's "Lady of Shalott"," 25-26.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 25-26.

Siddal saw herself reflected in the Lady to a much greater extent than the extent to which Hunt claimed to have been affected. As the Lady was confined to the tower, Siddal was confined to the inside world. Both remained restricted to reproducing simple mirror reflections of the world. As the Lady weaved steadily for no one, Siddal's hopes of reaching the outside world were remote, and her works were not created for the public eye of the market.<sup>49</sup> Unlike the wildly sexual, longhaired Lady depicted by Hunt, Siddal portrayed the Lady as having hair pulled back and tied at the nape of the neck, much like herself – a demure, modest, downcast look.<sup>50</sup> However, the fashion of the time consisted of a tight-fitting one piece dress belted over the hips at the waist, proving that Siddal's own self-image catered to the role of Victorian women in that both she and the Lady were meant to look innocent, yet sensual at the same time; although remaining a prisoner, she continued dressing to please men.<sup>51</sup>

"The Lady of Shalott" became wildly popular among Pre-Raphaelite artists for its endearing Arthurian quality. The Lady gained insight into the world by combating the curse of original sin and the confinements of domesticity, thereby embracing reality and human nature. The victimized Victorian woman and Tennyson's advocacy of human affection is shown in these depictions. The debate between poetry and artwork is clear; Tennyson emphasized art as an imitation of poetry. The works of William Holman Hunt and John William Waterhouse are very aesthetically appealing representations of the Lady and present her as a rebellious

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 25-26.

<sup>50</sup> Udall, "Between Dream and Shadow," 34.

<sup>51</sup> Shefer, "Elizabeth Siddal's "Lady of Shalott"," 26-28.



enchantress. However, the Victorian values of suppressed women are best presented from the female perspective of Elizabeth Siddal.

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