

POETRY (Detailed study)

[The Lady of Shalot - Part I](#)

Alfred Tennyson, 1st Baron Tennyson FRS (6 August 1809 – 6 October 1892) was a British poet. He was the Poet Laureate during much of Queen Victoria's reign and remains one of the most popular British poets. In 1829, Tennyson was awarded the Chancellor's Gold Medal at Cambridge for one of his first pieces, "Timbuktu". He published his first solo collection of poems, *Poems Chiefly Lyrical* in 1830. "Claribel" and "Mariana", which remain some of Tennyson's most celebrated poems, were included in this volume. Although decried by some critics as overly sentimental, his verse soon proved popular and brought Tennyson to the attention of well-known writers of the day, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Tennyson's early poetry, with its medievalism and powerful visual imagery, was a major influence on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

*On either side the river lie
Long fields of barley and of rye,
That clothe the wold and meet the sky;
And thro' the field the road runs by
To many-tower'd Camelot;

And up and down the people go,
Gazing where the lilies blow
Round an island there below,
The island of Shalott.*

*Willows whiten, aspens quiver,
Little breezes dusk and shiver
Thro' the wave that runs for ever
By the island in the river
Flowing down to Camelot.*

*Four gray walls, and four gray towers,
Overlook a space of flowers,
And the silent isle imbowers
The Lady of Shalott.*

*By the margin, willow veil'd,
Slide the heavy barges trail'd
By slow horses; and unhail'd
The shallop flitteth silken-sail'd
Skimming down to Camelot:*

*But who hath seen her bairn her hand?
Or at the casement seen her stand?
Or is she known in all the land,
The Lady of Shalott?*

*Only reapers, reaping early
In among the bearded barley,
Hear a song that echoes cheerly
From the river winding clearly,
Down to tower'd Camelot:*

*And by the moon the reaper weary,
Piling sheaves in uplands airy,
Listening, whispers " 'Tis the fairy
Lady of Shalott."*

Poetry lines explanation:

Part 1, Lines 1-10

Lines 1-5

*On either side the river lie
Long fields of barley and of rye,
That clothe the wold and meet the sky;
And through the field the road runs by
To many-towered Camelot;*

Tennyson starts out this poem with a quiet description of a landscape. A river runs through fields of grain. The barley and the wheat cover ("clothe") the "wold" (an old word for an open, unforested piece of land). Through this field, there's a road running toward the castle of Camelot, which is the legendary home of King Arthur and his knights.

Lines 6-9

*And up and down the people go,
Gazing where the lilies blow
Round an island there below,
The island of Shalott.*

- Apparently this road is pretty well traveled. The people who use the road can look down and see an island in the middle of the river. This island, which the speaker says is surrounded by lilies, is called the island of Shalott.
- FYI, that's pronounced with the accent on the second syllable (sha-LOTT). To hear it out loud, check out one of the audio recordings of the poem in the "Best of the Web" section

Lines 10

Willows whiten, aspens quiver,

- The poem holds off on the plot details for a second here, and tells us a little more about the natural world around the island.
- We hear about the willow trees that grow on the river banks, and the aspen trees that "quiver" (when the wind blows through the branches of an aspen tree, the leaves shake or "quiver"). **Part 1, Lines 11-23**

Line 11

Little breezes dusk and shiver

- The speaker mentions little breezes that blow around the island too, and says that they "dusk and shiver." It's a little hard to say exactly what those words mean in this context, since we usually don't talk about something "dusking."
- All the same, can you feel the atmosphere this creates? Even if the words don't add up right away, can you feel the little chill of darkness and mystery they send through the line? That's what they're there for.

Lines 12-14

Through the wave that runs for ever

By the island in the river

Flowing down to Camelot.

- Those breezes run along with the river, which flows constantly past the island in an endless wave.
- Here the speaker is really underlining the flow of the river as it heads toward Camelot. That flow, that "wave that runs for ever" (line 12) will be really important later on, so he's careful to plant the idea in our heads now.

Lines 15-16

Four grey walls, and four grey towers,

Overlook a space of flowers,

- Now we hear about a building on the island, a simple structure, just four walls with four towers. We imagine a mini-castle, a way smaller version of the many-towered Camelot we heard about in line 5.
- It's apparently surrounded by flowers too. Weaving the natural and the manmade together is a big deal in this poem.

Lines 17-18

And the silent isle imbowers

The Lady of Shalott.

- Finally, we meet the star of this little show, the Lady herself. The only thing we learn right away is that the silent island of Shalott "imbowers" her. This might be an unfamiliar word, but it's really important for this poem. It means to enclose, to shut up in a bower, which was the private room of a medieval lady. Right off the bat, we can feel how the lady is restricted, shut up, even imprisoned on this island.

Lines 19-23

By the margin, willow-veiled,

Slide the heavy barges traileid

By slow horses; and unhailed

The shallop flitteth silken-sailed

Skimming down to Camelot:

- Now we head back outside.
- The speaker is almost teasing us, giving us yet more descriptions of the banks of the river with its willow trees (fascinating, huh?).
- We also hear more about the traffic on the river. Horses pull big heavy barges upstream, and shallows (little open boats for shallow waters) fly ("flitteth") down the river to Camelot, pushed by their silky sails.

Part 1, Lines 23-41

Lines 24-27

*But who hath seen her wave her hand?
Or at the casement seen her stand?
Or is she known in all the land,
The Lady of Shalott?*

- Basically, lots of people pass up and down the river, traveling on it and using the path beside it.
- But has anyone, the speaker wonders, seen the Lady of Shalott wave her hand, or seen her standing at her window ("casement" is just an old-fashioned word for window)?
- In fact, he wonders, does anyone in the land know her at all? Apparently she's an invisible mystery, this lady.

Lines 28-32

*Only reapers, reaping early
In among the bearded barley,
Hear a song that echoes cheerly
From the river winding clearly,
Down to towered Camelot:*

- It seems that only the people who gather the grain in the fields ("the reapers") notice a sign of the Lady. They hear her singing a song that echoes happily down the river to Camelot.
- Can you feel how everything pulls down toward Camelot? The fifth line in every stanza is (almost) always about something or someone going toward Camelot, like it was a magnet.

Lines 33-36

*And by the moon the reaper weary,
Piling sheaves in uplands airy,
Listening, whispers "Tis the fairy
Lady of Shalott."*

- When the reapers are working at night, piling up "sheaves" (big bundles of cut grain), they hear the Lady singing. They seem a little enchanted/creeped out by her song, and call her "the fairy Lady of Shalott" as if she was a ghost or magical spirit.
- The first part ends, and we've still only heard about the Lady from a distance.

Summary

The Lady of Shalott by Alfred Lord Tennyson is a popular ballad that illustrates the isolation of a woman in a tower far from what she wants to live and experience. She lives a life imprisoned by a curse she knows no consequence for and so hesitates to live her life the way she would have liked. If looked at closely we can see how her situation is like that of many individuals who struggle to step out of their comfort zones to experience life to its fullest. They lose out on seeing their dreams come to existence through the chances that they took without letting doubt and fear get in the way.

The opening stanza of this poem is introducing the two most important places that are present in this narrative: Camelot, and Shalott. We, as readers are given a vivid image of the beautiful main land of Camelot. The road to which, is full of natural beauty and the constant flow of people travelling in and out. Shalott, on the other hand, is mentioned almost as if in passing, and is portrayed as just a place that is merely noticed by people on their journey to and fro Camelot.

This stanza shifts the imagery in the direction of winter; with snowy white willows, and aspen trees that “quiver” in the cold. It also mentions the “little breezes” that run through the waves of the river near the island of Shalott, which flows towards Camelot. The island is finally given some attention, as the introduction to the Lady of Shalott surfaces. The Lady of Shalott is described to be sheltered in a building or structure, which is described to have four grey walls and towers and is located on a lifeless island. This depiction is in obvious high contrast with the flowers and eye-catching view of Camelot that is surrounding her.

Stanza three begins by painting a picture of willows that cover the bank of the river; diverting our attention back to the busy scene outside the small castle-like building that the Lady of Shalott is encased in. This river and the road leading to Camelot is described to be busy with “heavy barges” (boats carrying goods), horses and “shallop flitteth silken sail’d” (small boats flying down the river with their silk sails). The narrator here starts to throw around questions that force the reader to wonder more about who the lady of Shalott actually is.

This stanza begins by answering the questions stanza three concluded with. The only people, who saw her wave her hands, stand by her window or just acknowledge her existence were the “reapers” who were harvesting barley in the early hours. These men would hear the echoes of her singing being carried out from Shalott, and recognize her as “the fairy Lady of Shalott.” The last four lines of this stanza illustrate, that not only could they continue to hear her in the late hours of their harvesting, but also that she’s a “fairy” given that she is such a mysterious being to all of those who are outside her small castle-like home. Shalott, on the other hand, is mentioned almost as if in passing, and is portrayed as just a place that is merely noticed by people on their journey to and fro Camelot.

Analysis:

Tennyson uses the opening stanza of his poem to really set the tone for the rest of the poem. We are introduced to two high contrasting places: Camelot and Shalott. Camelot can effortlessly represent the dream of any and every person: a world full of life and opportunities, even the roads to which look attractive and inviting. There are roads that lead

to a life of opportunity for every person. Each individual has their own Camelot and every tower within, symbolizes the desires and hopes that they would love to reach one day. Shalott, however, can just as easily represent the bubble that we as individuals create for ourselves. It is a place that people merely notice in passing. So the comfort zones and rules that we create for ourselves that no one else really pays attention to, are without much difficulty represented by Shalott in this poem.

Here, we start to grasp the mood that Tennyson is creating for the story he's about to tell. The winter represents the chilly nature of the events that will unfold in the rest of the poem as well as the bitter cold that awaits us outside our comfort zones. "Little breezes" of our hopes and dreams travel down to Camelot, to add to the world that we want to reach so desperately in our own ways. In this stanza, the common man/woman is introduced through the character of the Lady of Shalott. Like the lady, we as humans often live our lives with caution and safety; so the depiction of four grey walls and towers fits well in representing a dull bubble that we have created for ourselves in order to stay alive and afloat in the world. Our dreams and desires for our futures, however, reside in the attractive world of Camelot.

This stanza takes the focus from our personal bubbles back to "Camelot", where there is so much potential for everything we have ever wanted. It is definitely not grey and safe. Just the path leading to it is covered with trees of life and "heavy barges", horses and other small boats, which could easily portray the ideas we have for our lives that are too risky to stay in Shalott. They are then slowly making their way across the rivers and roads to Camelot, where they will be housed. The questions asked at the end of this stanza highlight how trapped we are in the safe zones we have created for ourselves that the things and people outside of those zones seem like a farfetched idea instead of a reality, much like the lady of Shalott is to the people of and around Camelot.

This stanza concludes the first part of the poem. Here Tennyson mentions reapers who are harvesting barley, and they are the only ones who know of the lady's existence because they hear the echoes of her singing at day and night. Because they don't know much about her and she is a mystery to most, they consider her a fairy. If we look at the lady of Shalott as ourselves we can see that we are mere ideas to people whom we haven't stepped out of our comfort zones to meet and because of that, our aspirations for life are mere echoes that reach people. We are fearless when it comes to creating our "Camelot", but so very fearful when it comes to taking risks to achieve those goals. That is why our words will not impact those around us, and our voices will stay as hollow as echoes no matter if we sing about our plans day and night. If we want to be acknowledged we have to take the risk of stepping out of what is normal for us.

Themes in *The Lady of Shalot*

The Victorian Ideal of Womanhood: In many ways, the Lady's situation is evocative of the status of women in Victorian England and subtly criticizes their lack of agency. The image of a lady in a tower acts as a metaphor for the woman who is locked away from society in order to protect her purity. The Lady's options in the poem amount to either remaining in the tower, lonely and "half-sick of shadows," or risking a curse through interacting with society. The scene where the Lady looks out at Lancelot can be read as her proverbial "fall from

grace.” Just as the slightest rumor of impropriety would have resulted in social ruin for a Victorian woman, the Lady dies for her small exertion of choice and curiosity.

The Isolated Artist and Society: The place of the artist in society has long been debated, and one recurring trope is that art thrives in isolation and is sullied by social interaction and obligation. The Lady of Shalott can be seen as an artist, for she creates a “magic web,” or tapestry, based on the sights she sees in her mirror. At the beginning of the story, she “delights” in this work and has no other cares but her art. However, as the story progresses, she begins to express her dissatisfaction with her isolation and grows “half-sick of shadows”—sick of creating images of life without actually participating in it. She eventually looks out at Camelot only to have her art fly out the window, symbolizing the central conflict between the artist’s need for solitude and the human desire for connection.

The Supernatural: Though the source is never explicitly defined or acknowledged, the poem contains a supernatural undercurrent. The Lady’s life is ruled by a curse of unknown origin that forbids her from interacting with the world outside of her tower. She spends her days weaving a “magic web” based on the sights she sees in her mirror, a kind of supernatural craft. In both instances in which someone directly reacts to the Lady, it is with a sense of fear or awe: the reapers dub her a “fairy” and the knights of Camelot cross themselves out of fear. The perception of the supernatural serves as a barrier between the Lady and human connection, isolating her not only physically but also conceptually.

Freedom Comes at a Cost: Regardless of the lens with which readers approach “The Lady of Shalott,” the concept of freedom is a recurrent end goal. The Lady is isolated in a tower and subject to a curse that tells her she cannot look at Camelot except in her mirror. The essential idea is that she is restricted, unable to pursue something that she wants. The price of looking out the window at Camelot, as the Lady finds out, is death. Whether it is the Victorian woman seeking social agency, the artist reaching for human connection, or an ostracized person looking for social acceptance, the choice is the same: remain safely ensconced in the lonely tower, or chase freedom at the cost of life itself.

- Robert Browning

Robert Browning (7 May 1812 – 12 December 1889) was an English poet and playwright whose mastery of the dramatic monologue made him one of the foremost Victorian poets. His poems are known for their irony, characterization, dark humour, social commentary, historical settings, and challenging vocabulary and syntax.

Browning's early career began promisingly, but collapsed. The long poems *Pauline* (1833) and *Paracelsus* (1835) received some acclaim, but in 1840 the difficult *Sordello*, which was seen as wilfully obscure, brought his poetry into disrepute. His reputation took more than a decade to recover, during which time he moved away from the Shelleyan forms of his early period and developed a more personal style.

In 1846 Browning married the older poet Elizabeth Barrett and went to live in Italy. By the time of her death in 1861 he had published the crucial collection *Men and Women* (1855). The collection *Dramatis Personae* (1864) and the book-length epic poem *The Ring and the Book* (1868-1869) followed, and made him a leading British poet. He continued to write prolifically, but his reputation today rests largely on the poetry he wrote in this middle period.

When Browning died in 1889, he was regarded as a sage and philosopher-poet who through his writing had made contributions to Victorian social and political discourse. Unusually for a poet, societies for the study of his work formed while he was still alive. Such Browning Societies remained common in Britain and the United States until the early 20th century.

Memorabilia Poem

*Ah, did you once see Shelley plain,
And did he stop and speak to you?
And did you speak to him again?
How strange it seems, and new!*

*But you were living before that,
And you are living after,
And the memory I started at—
My starting moves your laughter!*

*I crossed a moor, with a name of its own
And a certain use in the world no doubt,
Yet a hand's-breadth of it shines alone
'Mid the blank miles round about:*

*For there I picked up on the heather
And there I put inside my breast
A moulted feather, an eagle-feather—*

Well, I forget the rest.

Outline of the poem:

"Memorabilia" is a poem written by Robert Browning. The first stanza asks if you have seen the famous writer and if he seemed weird or different. The second stanza states that you were living before and after the event. The third stanza says he crossed a huge swamp. The fourth stanza says that he picked up an eagle feather while crossing the swamp. The poem is simply about different memories all smashed into one.

Poem background:

According to historical anecdote, this poem stems from an encounter Browning had with a person who had once met the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (Shelley died quite young, when Browning himself was only ten). Browning reacted with awe when the man described his meeting with the famed poet, and the man is said to have laughed at him for this reaction. This short lyric relates Browning's feelings about this encounter to his feelings at walking across a moor and finding an eagle's feather.

Form

"Memorabilia" consists of four four-line stanzas, written in iambic tetrameter. The stanzas rhyme ABAB. The form appears frequently in William Wordsworth's lyrics, and this poem does have an almost Wordsworthian outlook: it is contemplative and spiritual, and parallels the natural world to the human one.

Commentary

The title of this poem suggests a kind of memory that is linked with physical objects. Browning's encounter with the man who has met Shelley takes its importance from the fact that this man was once physically with Shelley and is now physically with Browning. This second-degree encounter with the great poet, now dead, corresponds metaphorically to the second-degree encounter with the eagle, now flown away having left only a feather; but the encounters also correspond physically, in that the physical object of the feather triggers the thought of the human encounter. This suggests a much more mundane and direct concept of natural reality and memory than that postulated by the Romantics (to whom Shelley belonged). Neither the encounter with the feather (nature) nor the memories of Shelley result in rapture or epiphany in Browning's poem (as they do in Romantic lyrics); rather, they imply a sense of loss and distance, of separation.

Indeed, not only does memory fail to lead to rapture, it has very little evocative power at all: Browning does not remember the rest of his walk on the moor beyond the finding of the feather. Moreover, Browning places little faith here in the life of the mind, the ability of analysis: he finds himself unable to elaborate more on the relationship between the feather and the man who met Shelley. Yet somehow this world of mundane physical objects and faint mental suggestions can provide as much material for poetry as the wild spiritual inspirations of Shelley's "West Wind" or Wordsworth's daffodils.

Analysis:

This poem, printed in 1855, was inspired by a meeting Browning once had with a man who had known P.B. Shelley, one of Browning's great influences as a young man. Shelley was a seminal Romantic poet associated with the idea that moments can lead a man to great transcendence and truth. Though he was one of Browning's early inspirations, Browning would later move into much murkier territory in his poetry, emphasizing psychological complexity and systems of thought.

This poem, one of the few in which it is easy to consider the speaker to be Browning himself, is about the debt we owe to what came before us. The simplicity of the verse – two four-line stanzas of iambic tetrameter – calls to mind the poetry of Shelley or Wordsworth, a fitting choice since it was written in remembrance of these Romantic influences.

In the first two stanzas, the speaker is childishly excited even with this second-degree contact with Shelley. But when the man to whom he gushes laughs at him, the speaker notes "But you were living before that,/And you are living after," acknowledging that his one incident (his meeting with Shelley) is but a moment among a multitude of moments in life.

In general, Browning's work is interested with delving into the multitude of life's moments, seeking out their complexity and contradictions. However, the final two stanzas see the speaker ignoring the evocative landscape of the moor in exchange for one feather left by an eagle, a great and stately bird. Much as the Romantic poets might have been inspired to a full reflection by one small natural detail, so is Browning acknowledging in this poem that he retains the seeds of that influence. One moment can contain within it a lifetime of inspiration.

The poem can be read as a short reflection on how we hang on to small moments because they contain in them such profundity, a very Romantic idea. But in relation to Browning's career, the poem is a bit deeper: he is reflecting how even though he evolved past these Romantic tendencies and explored his myriad interests in his poetry, there is still a part of him that is awed by one "eagle-feather" amongst a landscape, or by a story of a simple meeting that had happened decades before. In other words, that childish Romantic part of Browning still exists, as do presumably many other parts.

The Blessed Damozel

– Gabriel Charles Dante Rossetti

Gabriel Charles Dante Rossetti (12 May 1828 – 9 April 1882), generally known as Dante Gabriel Rossetti was an English poet, illustrator, painter and translator, and a member of the Rossetti family. He founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848 with William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais. Rossetti was later to be the main inspiration for a second generation of artists and writers influenced by the movement, most notably William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones. His work also influenced the European Symbolists and was a major precursor of the Aesthetic movement.

Rossetti's art was characterized by its sensuality and its medieval revivalism. His early poetry was influenced by John Keats. His later poetry was characterized by the complex interlinking of thought and feeling, especially in his sonnet sequence, *The House of Life*. Poetry and image are closely entwined in Rossetti's work. He frequently wrote sonnets to accompany his pictures, spanning from *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1849) and *Astarte Syriaca* (1877), while also creating art to illustrate poems such as *Goblin Market* by the celebrated poet Christina Rossetti, his sister.

Poem Lines

*The blessed damozel lean'd out
From the gold bar of Heaven;
Her eyes were deeper than the depth
Of waters still'd at even; She had
three lilies in her hand, And the
stars in her hair were seven.*

*Her robe, ungirt from clasp to hem,
No wrought flowers did adorn,
But a white rose of Mary's gift,
For service meetly worn;
Her hair that lay along her back
Was yellow like ripe corn.*

*Her seem'd she scarce had been a day
One of God's choristers;
The wonder was not yet quite gone
From that still look of hers;
Albeit, to them she left, her day
Had counted as ten years.*

(To one, it is ten years of years.
. . . Yet now, and in this place,
Surely she lean'd o'er me--her hair
Fell all about my face
Nothing: the autumn-fall of leaves.
The whole year sets apace.)

*It was the rampart of God's house
That she was standing on;
By God built over the sheer depth
The which is Space begun;
So high, that looking downward thence
She scarce could see the sun.*

*It lies in Heaven, across the flood
Of ether, as a bridge.
Beneath, the tides of day and night
With flame and darkness ridge The
void, as low as where this earth
Spins like a fretful midge.*

*Around her, lovers, newly met
'Mid deathless love's acclaims,
Spoke evermore among themselves
Their heart-remember'd names;
And the souls mounting up to God Went
by her like thin flames.*

*And still she bow'd herself and stoop'd
Out of the circling charm;
Until her bosom must have made
The bar she lean'd on warm,
And the lilies lay as if asleep
Along her bended arm.*

*From the fix'd place of Heaven she saw
Time like a pulse shake fierce
Through all the worlds. Her gaze still strove
Within the gulf to pierce Its path;
and now she spoke as when The
stars sang in their spheres.*

*The sun was gone now; the curl'd moon
Was like a little feather*

*Fluttering far down the gulf; and now
She spoke through the still weather.
Her voice was like the voice the stars
Had when they sang together.*

*(Ah sweet! Even now, in that bird's song,
Strove not her accents there,
Fain to be hearken'd? When those bells
Possess'd the mid-day air,
Strove not her steps to reach my side
Down all the echoing stair?)*

*"I wish that he were come to me, For he
will come," she said. "Have I not pray'd
in Heaven?--on earth, Lord, Lord, has
he not pray'd?
Are not two prayers a perfect strength?
And shall I feel afraid?*

*"When round his head the aureole clings,
And he is cloth'd in white,
I'll take his hand and go with him
To the deep wells of light; As unto
a stream we will step down, And
bathe there in God's sight.*

*"We two will stand beside that shrine,
Occult, withheld, untrod,
Whose lamps are stirr'd continually
With prayer sent up to God; And see
our old prayers, granted, melt Each
like a little cloud.*

*"We two will lie i' the shadow of
That living mystic tree
Within whose secret growth the Dove
Is sometimes felt to be,
While every leaf that His plumes touch
Saith His Name audibly.*

*"And I myself will teach to him,
I myself, lying so,
The songs I sing here; which his voice
Shall pause in, hush'd and slow,*

*And find some knowledge at each pause,
Or some new thing to know."*

*(Alas! We two, we two, thou say'st!
Yea, one wast thou with me
That once of old. But shall God lift
To endless unity
The soul whose likeness with thy soul
Was but its love for thee?)*

*"We two," she said, "will seek the groves
Where the lady Mary is,
With her five handmaidens, whose names
Are five sweet symphonies,
Cecily, Gertrude,
Magdalen, Margaret and
Rosalys.*

*"Circlewise sit they, with bound locks
And foreheads garlanded;
Into the fine cloth white like flame
Weaving the golden thread,
To fashion the birth-robes for them
Who are just born, being dead.*

*"He shall fear, haply, and be dumb:
Then will I lay my cheek
To his, and tell about our love,
Not once abash'd or weak: And
the dear Mother will approve My
pride, and let me speak.*

*"Herself shall bring us, hand in hand,
To Him round whom all souls
Kneel, the clear-rang'd unnumber'd
heads Bow'd with their aureoles: And
angels meeting us shall sing To their
citherns and citoles.*

*"There will I ask of Christ the Lord
Thus much for him and me:--
Only to live as once on earth
With Love,--only to be,
As then awhile, for ever now*

Together, I and he."

*She gaz'd and listen'd and then said,
Less sad of speech than mild,--
"All this is when he comes." She ceas'd.
The light thrill'd towards her, fill'd With
angels in strong level flight.
Her eyes pray'd, and she smil'd.*

*(I saw her smile.) But soon their path Was
vague in distant spheres:
And then she cast her arms along
The golden barriers,
And laid her face between her hands, And
wept. (I heard her tears.)*

Form:

'*The Blessed Damozel*' by Dante Gabriel Rossetti is a traditional ballad that alternates its meter between iambic tetrameter, made of four beats per line, and iambic trimeter, containing three unstressed followed by stressed, beats per line. Each stanza of the poem is a sestet, meaning that it contains six lines. Additionally, Rossetti maintains the rhyme scheme of ABCBDB throughout the piece.

Summary:

"*The Blessed Damozel*" by Dante Gabriel Rossetti is a ballad that is dedicated to the love between a woman trapped in heaven and a man stuck on Earth. The poem begins with the speaker describing a woman who, leaning out from heaven, can be seen holding lilies in her hands. She is breathtakingly beautiful but also melancholy. It soon becomes clear that she left someone on Earth. There is a lover, who's lines are written in the first person and contained within parenthesis, that is heartbroken by her departure. They pine for one another across the extraordinarily vast expanse between the "ramparts" of "God's house," on which she is leaning, and Earth.

The damsel, sounding like bird song, speaks out loud for all to hear. She describes the love that the two share and how soon, because they have both prayed for it, they will be reunited. God will bring them together.

Once her beloved arrives in heaven she will show him all there is to see. They will meet the Virgin Mary and she will introduce them to Christ who will bless their love. The two will be able to finally live in the peace and solitude they did not get to experience on Earth. Unfortunately, this is just a dream and after returning to reality the damsel breaks down crying once more at their separation.

Analysis of *The Blessed Damozel*

Rossetti begins this piece by having his speaker describe the woman that he refers to as, "*The blessed damozel.*" This woman is leaning out over a wall, one of the highest points

in “Heaven.” The narrator can see into her eyes and discerns that they are “deeper than the depth” of stilled water. This “damozel,” or damsel, a young unmarried woman, is extraordinarily interesting to the speaker. He sees her as unattainable, but also as infinitely deep and beautiful.

The speaker continues on, giving some more detail to the scene he is viewing. The woman is holding “three lilies in her hand,” and scattered throughout her hair are seven stars, representing the seven classical planets or luminaries. This woman is part of humankind and subject, in some way, to the delicacies of life and death but she is closer to God than a normal person would be. She is being directly related to the sky, the traditional realm of God. It will become clear that this lady has passed on and is in fact in heaven with God, pining for one she left behind.

The damsel’s dress is loose around her waist, it has become “ungirt.” Instead of being covered in decorations as one might expect, it is not covered in “wrought flowers,” or adorned in anyway. That is, aside from a “white rose of Mary’s gift.” This rose that she is wearing is a direct reference to Christianity. The Virgin Mary is often represented as a white rose and referred to as the “Rose of Heaven.” This strengthens the divine connection that this woman appears to have.

The last lines of this stanza once more contrast the religious imagery. Instead of having her hair pulled back and covered as would be proper, it is down, laying “along her back” and shining bright “yellow.” A woman’s hair has been seen throughout time as the embodiment of a her sexuality and to have it out as this character does would not follow with Christian teaching. It seems to the speaker, from her countenance, that the woman has only just gotten to heaven. She is “One of God’s choristers,” but she still has a look of “wonder” on her face as if she only just arrived. She is still stunned by her surroundings. It might seem as if the woman has only been there for one day, but she’s been there for ten years. This speaks to her purity and divine soul, that she is still amazed by what she is seeing.

The fourth stanza of the poem is told from a different perspective. The lover that she left behind in the mortal world is mourning for her absence. To him, it seems like she has been gone much longer than ten years, but he can still remember her well. So well, that at this moment it seems as if she is there leaning over him, her hair draping around his face. This fantasy is soon crushed. It is not the hair of the damsel, only leaves that are falling from a tree. This person was outside daydreaming and got caught up in the fantasy.

The narration returns to the moment when the speaker is gazing up at his beloved who is standing on the “rampart of God’s house.” She’s leaning over the walls that surround heaven. God built this place in safety. It is so far above the Earth that when the damsel looks down, hoping to see her lover, she can’t even see the sun.

The rampart of God “lies in Heaven,” where the damsel is trapped. There are many things that separate the two lovers. There is the distance itself, as well as “the flood of ether” that heaven is built on, and the void of “space” through which the Earth is spinning “like a fretful midge,” or a worried fly.

This stanza is meant to emphasize the different worlds that these people live in. Earth is deeply distant from Heaven and is regarded from God’s house as a speck not even close enough to see.

The damsel is not alone in heaven. There are many people around her, lovers of all varieties. They are being reunited with those they have lost. Even though many have been separated for a long time, their hearts remember one another.

Their souls join together, and arm in arm, travel together “up to God.” She is not so lucky. Her lover is still on Earth and she is mourning their separation. These people pass by her like “thin flames,” and remind her of what she does not have. She is truly depressed by her situation. Even though she is in Heaven where she should be able to find eternal happiness, it is impossible for her without her lover at her side.

She is leaning upon the wall and gazing down at where she thinks Earth is. She is “bow’d,” or bowed, and “stoop’d” or stooped, against the wall. Her body appears deflated and exhausted. Her bosom is pressed against its surface.

She has stood this way for so long that her body heat will have been transferred to its cold surface. The lilies she is holding are lying against her “bended arm” as if they are sleeping. She is stuck in this place, there is no way out once one has entered.

From her viewing spot she can see that on Earth time is moving forward “fiercely” through all worlds. All are aging; it seems, except for her. The damsel now begins to speak, the reader does not know what she says at this point, and only that it sounds as if the stars are singing.

The lady is still standing at her viewing point singing out into the vastness of space. It is now night and the crescent moon is thin, like a “little feather.” It is in this scene that the damsel will now speak. The poet repeats once more that her voice is elegant and sounds like a number of stars are singing together.

Once more the poet chooses to have the lover speak to the reader through first person, contained within parentheses. It becomes clear in this section of the poem that this speaker is the lover that the damsel in heaven is so desperately missing.

While the reader still does not know what the damsel is saying, the lover on Earth seems to be able to understand her through the song of a bird. At the very least the singing of the birds reminds him of their time together just as does the ringing of church bells that he hears in the distance. They make him think of a time in which she accompanied him down “all the echoing stair.”

In the twelfth stanza of this piece the damsel’s words are revealed. She is described her desire for her lover, stuck on Earth, to join her in heaven. She says that she wishes he would “come to me.” Then quickly follows that by reassuring herself that, yes, “he will come.”

She knows this to be the case as she has prayed in “Heaven,” and he has prayed “on Earth” for the two of them to be together. She is questioning her situation and God, asking, is this not enough? What else can we possibly do to be reunited? The damsel continues to speak, describing for the reader her fantasy of what things will be like when he dies and is finally able to join her. His head will be ringed with a “aureole,” or halo, and he will be wearing white clothes.

She tells anyone who is listening that she will take “his hand and go with him” into the depths of heaven as all the other lovers have been. There they will step into a stream and “bathe there in God’s sight.” The two will bare themselves to the mercy and beauty of God. They will have no fear of the future now that they are together.

She continues her prediction of the future in the next stanza. She wants the two of them to be in “the shadow of / Occult,” or more simply, hidden away somewhere that no one can find or bother them. Inside this private place that she will find for them, there is much light and prayer. They will pray continually to God and bask in the granting of their previous requests.

When her lover comes to heaven the two of them will be able to lie together under the “mystic tree” that grows in God’s house. Everything around them will be filled with light and touched with divinity. They will finally be reunited and have the peace that they have been so desperate for.

The damsel has a lot of plans for their time together and one of them involves teaching her lover how to sing the songs of heaven. They will work together to get the parts of the songs right, and he will relish the practice. He will find “some new thing to know,” in all that they do. Singing is no exception. Once more the reader is returned to the ground where the lover is still bemoaning his living state.

The lover seems to intuit that fact that the damsel has plans to bring him to heaven with her, but he doubts that that could really happen. He is worried that the two of them will never be reunited. One of his main reasons for worrying is his belief that he has done nothing to prove he is worthy to go to heaven. The only good thing he says he has done harbor a “love for thee.”

The reader is returned to heaven and to the central narrative that the damsel is dreaming. She tells the reader, the open space in front of her, and God, that she will take her lover to see “the lady Mary,” the Virgin Mary, along with her many handmaidens who’s names she lists. This will be an important visit, in it’s own right, and for what Mary will do for them.

The current speaker, the damsel, describes how they will find the women. They will be sitting in a circle with crowns of flowers on their heads and clothed in “fine cloth.” The handmaids work continually making the robes for those who have just entered into heaven.

Her lover, upon seeing all these sights will be “dumb” with happiness. She will be there to reassure him though and make sure to “lay [her] cheek / To his,” and remind him of their love. They should not be ashamed or “abash’d” of their passion as the Virgin Mary will approve of their union. She will in fact be so proud of the couple that she will grant the damsel a request.

She says, with confidence, that Mary will bring the lovers, “hand in hand,” to see Christ. He will be encircled by the innumerable heads of souls worshipping at his feet, all of whom will have halos like the lover’s. Upon seeing the couple approach angels will begin to sing. Once she has gotten an audience with Christ she will ask him to allow her and her lover to live as they used to back on Earth, “With Love” only. She will tell Christ that they must be together in “Love” as they only had a short period to love each other on Earth. Now they will be able to do it for the rest of time.

The damsel breaks from the dream she is living in and comes back to her lonely reality. She is once more standing and gazing. She is more deflated and disappointed than she is sad at this point and says “mild[ly],” that all this will happen “when he comes.” She stopped speaking after these final words and she is then filled with the light of the angels and heaven. The damsel’s lover, still stuck on Earth, gets to speak two more times in the final

stanza of the poem. He first says that even though he is stuck on Earth he can see “her smile” in heaven.

The narrator of this piece breaks into his thought and reminds the reader that nothing has been resolved. The angels in light that were moving toward the damsel have changed “their path.” The lady takes this as a negative sign and leans down on the wall against which she has been standing and weeps. She cries so loudly and with so much passion that her beloved so far below her on Earth can hear “her tears.”

Reference:

Literary texts- Prose, Poetry and Fiction <<http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/works.html>>