

The Pre-Raphaelite Movement and The Lady of Shallot

Starting in the mid-1800's, the Pre-Raphaelite Movement was in some ways a rebellion of the status quo. The bright pigments, romanticized scenes, and crisp, clean lines seemed to be in direct opposition to what was popular at the time. The Industrial Revolution was just beginning, the middle class was becoming wealthier while the poor were becoming poorer, and art had become complacent and drab. It was even the "style" of the time to cover what were vibrantly pigmented paintings with a drab wash of brown, muting the colors.

Into this drab, somewhat dismal environment, and as a response to what they considered the "ugliness of pragmatism", entered the Pre-Raphaelites. Begun by a group of young men, led by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the movement was influenced by their love of medieval history and legend, religion, and to a lesser extent, revolution.

They used as their inspiration the tales of King Arthur, poems by Shakespeare, works by Sir Walter Scott; all of which were highly romanticized. Pastoral scenes, fair maidens, hidden meanings, religious imagery, death (a popular preoccupation among the Victorians), even feminine power and male entrapment were all represented.

The Pre-Raphaelites were distasteful of what was then the popular art – genre painting and imitative historical painting. They wanted to portray a more positive vision, loosen the formal structure, include more detail, use vibrant colors, and by doing so injected into art a romanticism that at the time was harshly criticized for being artificial, superficial, and sentimental.

The movement was not limited to art alone, but spilled over into other areas, such as poetry and the written word, as we see in the poem the Lady of Shallot. The following is a general overview (as I have interpreted it) as represented by John William Waterhouse's version of the Lady in her boat.

The Lady of Shallot was a work of poetry by Sir Alfred Lloyd Tennyson. Visually portrayed many way by Pre-Raphaelite artists including John William Waterhouse, (who was so obsessed with the poem he painted three separate episodes from the it) William Holman Hunt, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, it is a hauntingly beautiful story of a lady who is doomed by a curse to see life through a mirror, and then doomed to death for daring to view life (or attempt to find love) without it.

It is believed that the poem is based closely on another of Tennyson's works, *Idylls of the King* along with Thomas Mallory's *Morte d'Arthur* which features Elaine of Astolat. Since both works are similar, paintings of Elaine of Astolat and The Lady of Shallot share common subjects and are very similar in their imagery. They have at times been confused with each other.

Unrequited love, legends, lore, beautiful ladies, gallant knights, haunting changes in the visual details that Tennyson has so adroitly provided, draw you into the story of this doomed Lady. In the work of art chosen for us, painted by John William Waterhouse, the Lady is shown in her boat, at the moment she realizes her death is near.

Sunlight, mentioned earlier in the poem has now turned to rain, her eyes are shadowed, she is beginning her journey to the man only seen through a mirror, and she knows that she will be dead when she reaches her destination. Tennyson has removed all the vibrant colors mentioned earlier in the poem, replacing them with drabber colors, effectively changing the tenor or the story to one of sadness. The beautiful tapestry portrayed in the painting depicts medieval scenes of knights and ladies; the influence religion has on the Movement is portrayed through the crucifix placed on the prow of the boat. The Lady is frozen in the act of dropping the chain holding her anchored to the shore, to drift away from the sunshine (shown in the back right of the painting) and toward darkness and therefore death, exemplified by the lit lantern hanging from the front of the boat. The water is murky. A sense of calm seems to pervade the background, while a feeling of impending doom characterizes the foreground.

Beautiful though she may be, the Lady of Shallot's identity is unknown. When she arrives at her final destination, Camelot, all that can be said (by Lancelot) was "she has a lovely face". The object of her unrequited love, her downfall and therefore the cause of her death, the knight Sir Lancelot, was almost indifferent.

We have a beautiful maiden, an unknown curse, towers, knights, love, life, and death. All very romantic (if somewhat tragic) and all very much Pre-Raphaelite in nature.

Different Visual Interpretations of The Lady of Shallot



by: John W



by: Arthur



by: John William Waterhouse

Sources: *The Lady of Shallot*, by Sir Alfred Tennyson; www.sparknotes.com; The Pre-Raphaelites, Inspiration from the Past by Terri Harden.