

## **Abstract**

Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem "The Lady of Shalott" contains an enigmatic tale which can be interpreted as very relevant to society, most specifically for women who have been subordinated to patriarchy. The poem conveys in an elusive way the imbalanced gender ideology of Victorian Britain, using a metaphor entailing social and cultural contexts. Furthermore, it highly emphasizes the representations of both genders as either belonging to public and private spheres, or who are domineering and submissive, respectively. Like the Lady of Shalott, women were victims of social marginalisation, no matter how vital their roles were in a community. In his poem, Tennyson delineates gender roles and conditions from previous periods in British history, such as the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance and Victorian eras, in which women were considered less by society because of the limitation of their bodies. Likewise, it also presents their subjection as "redundancy", in which a woman was bound only to marriage and to whatever her husband would provide.

One of the activities that Victorian women were comfortable with was needlecraft, and this is Tennyson's inspiration behind the Lady's creativity in weaving. This also serves as their defence mechanism, or self-suppression, as to how they could control the thoughts of their oppressive circumstances, which are surfacing in their consciousness, by diverting their frustrations into something valuable while they build their aspirations on fulfilling their potential in society. Feminism has evolved because of women meeting to engage in needlework behind closed doors. The professions such as that of governess, nurse and midwife were entitled for women because these occupations are what they normally do in their private sphere. However, they were finally given recognition for these professions because they are truly essential to society. Likewise, the Lady of Shalott only achieves recognition from the public sphere of Camelot when she flees from her isolation amidst hardship and even in sorrow.

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## **I. Introduction**

The marginalisation of women in society has been prevalent for a long time. In the poem “The Lady of Shalott”, Alfred, Lord Tennyson presents a conceptual metaphor pertaining to the social context of the condition of women during the Victorian period. Tennyson, who was the Poet Laureate of England in 1850, composed this poem in order to emphasize the inequality of men and women in Victorian Britain. Taking into consideration that the poem’s story takes place in a medieval period, it embodies a strong image of how women were being oppressed by the dominance of patriarchy throughout the ages. The roles of women were restricted to domesticity because society imposed this on them, and they were stereotyped as the “other” and “less” when compared to men, who in ancient times were trained how to gather food and supplies for the survival of their families. Men assumed a superior position within the community. As a result, women felt inferior and were subjected to oppression. Thus, their suppressed feelings made them crave immensely for equality and redemption.

In comparing gender differences, the poem evaluates the nature of men as being incorporated in the “public sphere” of industry and dominance, while the women’s “private sphere,” is characterized by submissiveness and domesticity. The uses of the metaphor of a woman trapped in a tower within the poem emphasizes the severity of the situation, in which confinement in the tower signifies being ostracised from society. However, the Lady has found “contentment” while being confined to the tower. It is arguable that a person who faces oppression has the tendency to find comfort instead of fighting back. Joseph Chadwick (1986) notes how the Lady makes herself feel like a free person through the tasks that have been given to her. It may be ambiguous how she copes with them, but for the time being, her suppressed feelings save her from the insanity of isolation and eventually build her confidence to acquire her independence, even though it led to sorrow.

The Lady of Shalott is considered an emblem of the women who suffered from marginalisation in a gender ideological society from the Middle Ages to the Victorian period. Akin to the Lady of Shalott, women’s contributions in society were not considered essential because the working opportunities for them were limited and they were not as robust as men were. This kind of upheaval made women gradually seek change. Mary Poovey (1989) reveals the factors that make women gradually restore

their dignity by obtaining professions that were highly fundamental to their community. Thus, prohibiting women to express their rights in society makes them more driven to fight for gender equality.

Such a defence mechanism would be centred on how to endure and survive the propensity of an oppressive marginalisation in a gender specific society. Having the tendency to live in self-denial and not express ill-feelings for an unlimited time will not help a woman gain what she wanted in life. Hence, it is important to distinguish what makes a woman stop from doing so and to delineate how she will liberate herself from the barriers of marginalisation in order to attain liberation and redemption from the inequalities of gender ideologies.

## **II. The Lady's "survival" from marginalisation**

The Lady of Shalott finds refuge in her confinement within the tower by monotonously weaving a colourful web. The inspiration she perceives comes from the reflection that she sees in the mirror, which is obscure, given that she could not even see her own image but only the reflection of the "shadows of the world" (Tennyson l. 48).

Consequently, no matter how fascinating the surroundings and the inhabitants of Shalott are, she could still never visualize the reality and truth behind the vagueness of the images. Hence, Sharyn Urdall mentions that the mirror symbolizes purity, truth, and fidelity (34), but the Lady has not yet discovered her identity at all. This prohibition is brought about by her marginalisation from the "public sphere", where patriarchy dominates society. As a result, the Lady is only entitled to stay in the "private sphere" through her submissiveness.

Even though the Lady knew that a curse would be cast upon her once she "looks down to Camelot" (l. 41), she tries to divert her attention to something that would make her productive and artistic. She, gradually, applies the defence mechanism of suppression to live normally and forget the transgression that she experiences. Through this, she frequently depends on the images that she sees in the mirror, and builds her individuality through them (Chadwick 18). The images consist of "troop of damsels glad" (l. 55), or "long-haired page in crimson clad" (l. 58), and others. Watching the shadowy images and turning them into a colourful web is an ironic circumstance since she could not make her situation as vibrant as the people from the "outside world" or

society in general; however, this is how she consoles herself in her seclusion. One concept which the Lady applies to her suppression is the theory of the “looking-glass self”. This theory was constructed by Charles Horton Cooley, and states that a person visualizes the appearance of himself or herself to another person (Hensley 94). It helps the Lady of Shallot to build her confidence by placing herself through those images, hoping that she, too, will have her own reflection or persona to look upon in the future.

On the one hand, her weaving and imagination brings satisfaction to her life, but on the other, the vague images that appear and exit from the magic mirror only provide fragmented ideas, which are caused by a further curiosity and desire to see it clearly or experience them herself. Hence, the paradox of the magic mirror and her beautiful weaving makes her condition arduous because she would never attain any goal from staying by her loom, but will just be incessantly subject to isolation and be deprived of recognition of the other capabilities that she could provide in the outer world.

Subsequently, the fourth stanza in the second part of the poem describes an unfathomable situation since funerals and weddings entail disconnected entities, in which the Lady is in “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 loves lately wed” (ll. 64-70). She thinks that a funeral means the end of suffering and that makes her happy because ‘death’ would end a person’s misery. It just suggests that she is aware of her own misery, which she does not admit to. However, the successive characters who appear in the mirror are the couple who later got married; these are the only images she witnesses with intimacy signifying sharing one’s life with someone. That is the turning point of the Lady’s suppressed thoughts, in which she laments, “I am half sick of shadows” (l. 71). She eventually admits that she is tired of her condition of being alone, watching the vagueness of the world, and weaving repetitively what does not seem to end. The suppressed feelings and thoughts that she keeps gradually surface in her consciousness. She feels the burden of being incomplete and becoming subjected to “social castration”, an idea of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, which characterizes women’s inadequacy in terms of social power (Barry 125).

Her anguish is emphasized further when the image of Lancelot “flashed into the crystal mirror” (l. 106) as he sings “*Tirra lirra*” (l. 107). Lancelot’s voice has an intrinsic significance to the Lady since she also sings at times, in which “Only reapers, reaping early,/ In among the bearded barley,/ Hear a song that echoes cheerly”(ll. 28-30); thus, it suggests that singing is the only communication of the lady with the outer world, and hearing Lancelot makes her feel that someone is responding and understanding her. Edgar Shannon Jr. notes that Lancelot’s singing strengthens her will to disregard the curse (215). As a result, the Lady does not think twice about looking down to Camelot and leaving the tower, but as a consequence, the colourful web that she has woven flew away and the “magic mirror” cracks from side to side; thus, she cries “*The curse is come upon me!*” (l. 116). As the Lady transfers herself from inside the tower down to the stream, she has rejected her isolation (Shannon Jr. 218), her privacy is publicized (Chadwick 23) and her suppressed feelings emancipated.

As soon as the Lady exposes her private self to the public world, nature also changes when, all of a sudden, there was a “stormy east-wind straining,/ The pale yellow woods were waning,/ The broad stream in his banks complaining,/ Heavily the low sky raining ” (ll. 118-121). This means that the “public sphere”, in which the Lady is trying to adapt herself to, is not welcoming her. Later on, as she finds a vessel, and writes on the prow “*The Lady of Shalott*” (l. 126), knowing that at any time she might be meeting her “fate”. By writing her name, she introduces herself and states her identity (Shannon Jr. 218) while also disclosing her metonymic relationship with her island, Shalott (Colley 374). Furthermore, as “she loosed the chain” (l. 133), she symbolically releases herself upon the river (Shannon Jr. 218), gaining the liberation which she longed for, and waits for her “fate” wherever it would lead her, singing for the last time until her song ceases. Death is the curse cast upon her. James Kincaid claims that, “The broadest, most general irony of the poem is that the Lady simply exchanges one kind of imprisonment for another; her presumed freedom is her death.” (qtd. in Barzilai 232). It seems that the Lady cannot escape tragedy. However, as she reaches Camelot, the social pretensions of “Knight and burgher, lord and dame” (l. 160) become astonished at the Lady’s simplistic and ethereal looks, which contrasts with their wealth and comfort (Shannon Jr. 221). And while the inhabitants of Camelot read her name on the prow, they are confused by her existence, and are infused with

meekness, uncertainty, emptiness, whispers and speculations as to the Lady's mysterious appearance, which serves a major role in her aim of crossing over from her private self, because she now becomes the one who catches the public's gaze (Colley 273).

Carl Plasa claims that the Lady's journey towards Camelot through death conveys its own resistance to the transgression of gender divisions (250). It illustrates how difficult it is for women to define their identity, and when they do, there are constant obstructions in their way. The feminine subject in the tower and the feminine object in the boat are not the same woman since they have different worlds (Psomiades 36): the former used to live in comfort, "And little other care hath she" (l. 44) but suffers from self-denial, while the latter gradually builds up her confidence and strength and finds a substantial reason to face her battle for independence. The Lady's determination to live fully and face death, if necessary, suggests that she will never base her identity upon other people again (Shannon Jr. 215) since she succeeds in gaining her personality and turning away from being an automaton (Shannon Jr. 216).

### **III. The construction of the poem's metaphor**

Poetry can be used as a context to characterize or signify what the poet would like to convey (Kövecses 182). Zoltán Kövecses asserts that the major entities of poetic discourse are the speaker or poet, the topic, and the listener or recipient (185). In this manner, a conceptual metaphor is often applied in poetry which carries the details from its source domain to the target domain, or to the exact condition the poet would like to interpret (Lakoff 384). The source domain could be represented by concrete concepts such as plants, movement, body parts, journeys, etc., while a target domain could be understood by abstract concepts and is conveyed through social organization, life, theory, ideas, etc. The poet, Alfred Tennyson, indicates that marriage is the integral completion of women's destinies (Plasa 252); therefore, the poem "The Lady of Shalott" features the target domain of the social structure of gender ideologies and women's marginalisation in nineteenth-century England, and then its source domain through the Lady's confinement in the tower.

The very first lines "On either side the river lie/ Long fields of barley and of rye" (ll. 1-2) represent the source domain of place and cultivation, while the productive

locations of Camelot and Shalott represent the target domain. Hence, these places are also considered as metonymy or an entity that describes an environment physically and culturally (Kövecses 185). However, Tennyson highlights Camelot by stating “thro’ the field the road runs by” (l. 4), indicating that masculinity is the dominant and progressive gender; whereas, Shalott, as the “Gazing where the lilies blow/ Round an island there, below” (ll. 7-8), constitutes the private sphere of femininity. Though the island of Shalott is “round”, meaning a positive orientating metaphor (Lakoff 40), the spatial orientation of “below” represents a negative aspect where the female gender is considered as one that does not contribute as much as the male gender does in society. Kathy Alexis Psomiades characterizes the feminine representation of Shalott as being subjected to inferiority and submissiveness (34) since the Lady lives in the “Four grey walls, and four grey towers,” (l. 15) which is located on the far side of a “margin, willow-veil’d” (l. 19). This explains that she is imprisoned in an excluded place or position in society, where her existence is completely cut-off from all social activity (Chadwick 17). Thus, the phrase “overlook a space of flowers” in line 16 denotes the failure of men to recognize or understand the status of women (Plasa 256), even though they are a productive gender as well.

In general, the only activity in which the Lady engages is weaving. This is the equivalent of embroidering that kept a Victorian woman’s mind and fingers occupied while not pursuing her aspirations (Jeffers 58). The Lady is partly content with what she does, “There she weaves by night and day/ A magic web with colours gay” (ll. 37-38); this represents the repetitive activity that helped Victorian women to suppress their thoughts against the social exclusion of women in society. Moreover, one entity in the poem that signifies personification is the term, “moon” on line 69, “the moon was overhead”, in which a non-living thing is characterized in terms of human properties (Kövecses 57). In addition, the moon is symbolically associated with menstruation, which is one of the aspects of Victorian’s femininity society tended to repress (Plasa 252). This indicates the start of the Lady’s frustration with her confinement.

The description of Lancelot in lines 74-77, “He rode between the barley-sheaves/ The sun came dazzling thro’ the leaves/ Of bold Sir Lancelot” denotes how highly important a person he is. Being a character in Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*, in which he portrayed one of the courageous knights of King Arthur and committed an

illicit affair with Queen Guinevere (2004), he is personified as a man full of charisma and rigour. Furthermore, he represents men only as being the beneficiaries of a land that is cultivated by both genders. This adheres to the total injustice toward women in a society where patriarchy rules. As a result, the Lady revolts and seeks justice in the outside world.

The Lady's traversing the river is a sign of freedom since she could now truly see the world with vibrancy, because the colourful environment that she used to apply in her weaving just contains dull colours of shadowed images in the mirror. However, her journey towards the public sphere of Camelot is also a journey towards marriage and death, "Lying, robed in snowy white" (l. 136), a journey she made dressed as a bride (Chadwick 24). This relates to the women of the Victorian period, whose disposition in life was to frequently end up in marriage. Thomas Jeffers adds that the Lady's tragedy is a result of men's expectations of what women should and should not, can and cannot, do – only if the women could satisfy those expectations (58). This kind of condition just evaluates the injustice a wife could get once she got married with a man who does not respect her.

Alfred Tennyson's poem conveys a massive discrepancy between genders in society. Through this situation, the conceptual metaphor emphasizes the social and cultural context on his poem, stating that an old component or structure must be destroyed and then rebuilt again using the essential elements of the old structure but with a new implementation (Kövecses 191). Thus, to improve the conditions of Victorian women, it is preferable to reconstruct society by treating them equally and not disregarding their capabilities, and this could lead to a more valuable civilization.

#### **IV. Women's social marginalisation and their gradual redemption from it**

The Lady of Shalott initially chooses the comfort of a "private sphere" over resistance since she feels satisfied with the artistic beauty she is creating; therefore, she has no strong reason yet to resist her confinement. Even though she knows that a curse would be cast upon her once she disobeyed the rule, she does not verify the reason why and where the whispers come from. She just follows what is imposed on her without questioning it because she thinks that she is entitled to her confinement the rest of her life. As a result, the Lady's character primarily represents a lack of determination in

assessing her life by just being dependent on the comfort that is provided for her inside the tower, “And so she weaveth steadily,/ And little other care hath she” (ll. 41-42).

The situation of the Lady parallels the disposition of women who accept their roles in domesticity since they are comfortable in their own “private sphere”. They have the tendency to rely on other people for their security and comfort without imparting any opinion on whether they are entitled to their rights or if they will be given credit for it or not, because they just accept the roles that society has given them, and, furthermore, find satisfaction in them. Thus, the implication is that men stereotype women as objects of desire and imprison them in a culturally constructed images (Plasa 256) of being a “lack” or the “other” (Barry128).

The feminine gender has been marginalised as passive and weak for a very long time, whereas the masculine one was the active and industrial gender with the tendency to be domineering. One of the partial reasons for men’s dominance is their “greater propensity for aggression” (Brittan and Maynard 10) that resulted in the survival and promulgation of their vitality and vigour. Because of this, men often think of the irrelevance of women in society. There are numbers of instances where women are excluded from different types of work that are not related to domesticity, or are forbidden to have their own house, or even have control over their salary (Chafetz 69). Arthur Brittan and Mary Maynard insinuate that family is the place where a man tends to be authoritative (17), because the husband provides the economic comfort of the family, while the wife, according to Christine Delphy, supports the husband and accepts her unpaid domestic service at home, which is similar to serfdom (qtd. in Brittan and Maynard 118); she is “expected to feel, and not to think, to bend her head and not to walk head held high, to give up but never fight” (Avarvarei 536). A woman, or a good homemaker, could only make herself feel valuable when she is giving the needs and services for her family before her own (Rowbotham 76), and is also responsible for the preservation of customs and morality at home, which is considered important to society (Avavarei 537).

Even though women are much more prevalent now in the workforce, they are still stereotyped as “less” or inefficient because of the limitations of their bodies (Lips 159). One example is pregnancy, or just simply being a parent. This condition restrains them from handling their career consistently because they have to step back to cater to

the demands of parenthood and pass their tasks on to somebody else. This is similar in their manner of communication, which Robin Lackoff describes as “being polite with a specific voice tone and are prohibited the use of slang or curse words, which conveys the timidity and lack of conviction” (qtd. in Chafetz 68). Women who cross the barriers of the “public sphere” of industry encounter difficulties because they always have to watch their conduct and prove that they can surpass other’s expectations or criteria that have been imposed on them. For this reason, some women applied the notion of “penis envy”, which is a symbol of women’s social power (Barry 125) channelling their consciousness to be courageous, resourceful, creative, and fierce because men still perceive women as competitors in the workplace; and if they succeed, they will be considered as the “pathbreakers of social change” (Eagly 199).

Women’s entry into previously male-dominated professions entails progression (Lips 2). The gender ideology has gradually become less traditional, and their tasks in household and career roles are starting to be equal. Due to this, women are no longer bound to only perform domestic roles and remain in their “private sphere”, but can also show their capabilities by achieving goals and expressing their rights against oppression through education and social inclusion. Peter Barry evaluates Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* as meaning “gender roles must be malleable and changeable, not inevitable and unchangeable givens” (125). Being restricted by gender division will just hinder a person from the tasks he or she wants to accomplish; therefore, it is necessary that a person must be adaptable to changes and respect others’ viewpoints to attain a harmonious society.

## **V. The chronology of society’s gender roles**

### **A. Medieval period**

Men in the medieval period established themselves as highly notable persons. Their mere goal was to fight and there was no indication of passiveness in their personalities; therefore, they were always prepared to defend, or even show their harshness, by persecuting whoever would damage their image to prove their manhood. Women were their victims of exclusion and ruthless authority, along with homosexuals, heretics, and any rebel who did not belong to their social structures (McNamara 22).

However, some changes occurred right after the bubonic plague, which was also called the Black Death, which emerged in England in the fourteenth century and caused almost two million fatalities. According to Stephen Rigby, the post-plague period was considered one with more moderate social exclusion for women than usual, because the demand for labour opportunities increased (746). Jeremy Goldberg claims that women were able to acquire employment on the farm, in carpentry, and other occupations that were usually preserved for men; in addition, women often found jobs as servants or workers in the textile industry ( qtd. in Rigby 747). Even though women were regarded as part of the labour force in the medieval period, Martin Whyte evaluates their status as still being inconsistent with regards to their inclusion within society (qtd. in Rigby 748) due to their low-skilled occupations being only paid minimally, and handling numerous duties at once, as Philip Adams claims (qtd. in Rigby 749).

Women's roles and occupations concerning domesticity did not raise their social power or legal rights in society; they were still subordinat to patriarchal industry (Rigby 749). A woman who was born to an affluent family will marry at an early age, which results in her loss of independence since she has to surrender her rights of property to her husband, and once she becomes a widow, she has no full entitlement to the land of her husband, either (Rigby 750).

## **B. Renaissance period**

The characteristics of women, in the time of the Renaissance, have been defined as delicate, frail, and feeble. Thomas Salter (Aughterson 177) published an advice to mothers regarding the education of their daughters, stating that "young women must be active and industrious about the structure of their household." Likewise, there was a necessity for them to learn moral and natural philosophy, which they could apply in their everyday lives. However, he ironically contradicted himself as well, fearing that the maidens will then further realize the existence of wrong doings that is "imminent to human life" and they might be subject to committing them; "which is not requisite to be in young women". Thomas Salter despised men who used education as a tool to protect them from their vicious deeds against other people.

Moreover, when it came to women's relationships with men, it was necessary for a woman to distinguish how extensive a man's agricultural holding is and where she

could live comfortably while attending to her responsibilities as a homemaker (Aughterson 67). The woman's passiveness and domesticity would complement the man's industriousness as a farmer. As pertaining to duties of husband and wife, William Vaughan wrote *The Golden Grove*, informing his readers that one such duty is the husband's compassion towards the wife, to not hurt her by word or deed, and he must also provide her needs and her housekeeping according to his ability. The wife, on the other hand, must not tell other people whatever flaws or inadequacies her husband has, else people would just make her a laughing stock or a villain, desperately trying to put down her other half (Aughterson 97).

### **C. Victorian period**

The Victorian period was the most prosperous era among the previous ones since the industrial revolution in Britain was expanding. Because of this, there was a fresh bourgeois regime manifested in different households (Avarverei 543) and snobbery flourished within different classes of people (Lochhead 3). However, when it came to women's condition, they were still subordinated to the archaic patriarchal supremacy. As Helene Moglen points out, men had an egoistic and aggressive nature over women's self-denial and submissiveness (qtd. in Avarverei 539), which was the very situation of the Lady of Shalott.

Women, both in social and domestic life, from the middle class up to aristocrats, spent their time with needlecraft (Lochhead 6). Through this activity, Tennyson derives his inspiration for the poem that makes the Lady engage in weaving, like the Victorian women who kept themselves occupied with needlework in the pursuit of reproducing or rebuilding their own dreams, knowing they will be subjected to "redundancy". The "redundant" lives of women in British history were alarming, since they were constricted to marriage, prostitution, or even spinsterhood (Urdall 35). They felt themselves in jeopardy because they could not get out of the monotonous task imposed on women, and they always had to stand next to their husbands. Moreover, some feminists stated that nineteenth-century fiction often implied that only few women looked for a job because they are often portrayed as bourgeois, and if they did, it is either because they ran away from their family or faced economic difficulties (Barry 117). However, the main concern was about who the woman has to marry, who is

nearly always a man suitable for her class, or even higher, and who would fulfil her needs.

Stedman Jones stated that the household of a working-class family was not the best place for relaxation (qtd. in Seccombe 62). Men were usually exhausted from working long hours, and instead of going home after work, they would rather spend their time with their friends in the pub, using their wages for drinking rather than handing it over to their wives. Women, on the other hand, were very much devoted to their household, and just accepted whatever would be left from the husband's income. Oftentimes, they were in debt and the wife would pawn whatever she could trade. A wife sacrificed a lot, even her own health, just to make sure that her family, most especially the breadwinner, was well-nourished. However, Louise Tilly and Joan Scott mention that there were also proletariat husbands who were sensible about their working conditions, or their general situations, who gave their salaries completely to their wives (qtd. in Seccombe 58). Being a good husband, in a working-class definition, is being one who does not neglect and hurt his family, or who does not abuse his salary and gives it to his wife (qtd. in Seccombe 62).

The women's working conditions in the Victorian period were dire because they were always being marginalised as being inadequate for jobs outside domesticity (Poovey 8), yet they were becoming resilient about this kind of condition. In the 1790's, some women started to work in the market as butchers, or as wardens in jail. By the 1840's, some women worked as dressmakers or milliners, since they had the skills to be stylists and catered to the elegance of the bourgeois classes. However, the most refined profession that was delegated for a woman was being a governess (Poovey 126): it is similar to being a mother, who taught children a basic education, conduct, and manners in a private household. Mary Poovey considers it the ideological work of gender because of the strong role it establishes, and thus she states, "the figure epitomized the domestic ideal, and the figure who threatened to destroy it" (127). It suggests that as a profession, it is considered as middle-class, a woman having a similar salary as men in the working-class. This became the start of the gradual equalization of the separateness of the private and public spheres. Being a governess was a status of concern to their contemporaries because of competition for employment. Men started to feel threatened about the capabilities of women and complained that it would destroy the morality of

society because the norm that they believed in was that women were bound to be only at home (Poovey 128). Men were afraid that gender ideologies would change, in which they would not be superior over women any longer.

Later on, the progress in the new field of social history and of medicine made women valuable in their pursuit of professions such as nursing and midwifery (Sharpe 362). These professions were opened to women of all social classes; thus, it caused an argument whether it should be a profession or a vocation (Poovey 176). Others suggested that nursing must be represented as a profession in a form of regular training and adequate salaries, which would be a preparation for their retirement; on the contrary, it was suggested as a vocation, since the primary goal of being a nurse was to give help and assistance to the people who are suffering from sickness. One of the well-known women in this line of work was Florence Nightingale (Poovey 164), who provided aid and care for the wounded soldiers in the Crimean War. Through her profession, she proved that women could, indeed, work in a public sphere without any impediment because women had the foundation of looking after the necessities of their families. The notion of women's restriction in a society, where men dominated as the prime wage earners of the family, gradually collapsed. By the mid-1860's, the equality of female's competence in the workforce was taken seriously because of their independence, and the conservatives were worried that women of their generation might not resort to marriage, which at that time was the "only unit of social organization" (Poovey 155). Because of this peculiarity, women have been repressed again, though this did not stop them from planning on how to alleviate the oppression that they were suffering nonetheless. They started to have closed gatherings doing needlework in small literary or political groups, including even socialists and radicals (Avarvarei 542), and these meetings ignited the start of feminism. Through repression, as a historical construct, Victorian gender ideology was treated as a symbolic system with internal logic that was organized around masculine control and feminine resistance (Psomiades 37).

## **V. Coping with suppression**

The types of defence mechanisms that people use to save them from anxiety are repression and suppression. According to Matthew Hugh Erdelyi, repression is an early

defence system in which an idea is intercepted and blocked before it reaches the consciousness (qtd. in Dunn and Wilson 296), but if the anxiety aggressively provokes the person and reaches the consciousness, then suppression would be the next in line. Women like the Lady of Shalott, like women in the previous periods of British history, applied this kind of defence system to themselves because of the monotonous role that they had to play in society, for instance their engagement in needlework. They thought that in this way, they could primarily live normally by locking themselves in denial, and projecting that they were already indestructible and immune to the sense of pain (Wyckoff 35), rather than submitting themselves to anger and desolation. Historically and socially, women knew that they were being represented as vulnerable and defenceless, and had been kept out of the economic world and productive industry - and they kept on allowing themselves to be marginalised repetitively. Since suppression is associated with greater discomfort (Masedo and Esteve 200), pressure and anxiety would never be eradicated from their consciousness because they would like to be treated fairly.

Daniel Wegner and his colleagues (qtd. in Masedo and Esteve 200) asked a set of participants to block or suppress their neutral thoughts and not express them; however, the suppressed thoughts just turned into frequent occurrences on their minds. Thus, it indicates that these thoughts could actually become more visible in one's consciousness since the person is trying to hold them back and preventing him or herself from expressing them. Through this, the participants experienced the "post-suppression rebound effect", which has a greater frequency of recalling the prohibited thoughts they had established in their minds (Wilson and Dunn 297). This is exactly what the Lady of Shalott experiences: the more she gets her inspiration for weaving from the shadowed images in the mirror, the more she cannot eradicate the oppression of her condition. Although she is aware of her imprisonment, it only strikes her severely when she sees the intimate image of the young lovers, the only time she gets tired and isolated, or feeling truly ostracised from society.

However, in order to create a solution for women who face marginalisation in a gender specific environment, they must analyse what they lack and how strict their society is within the norms of gender ideologies. They have to figure out how to break it

and fight for their rights in order to prevent being subjected to any kind of oppression. Hogie Wyckoff mentions that there are three kinds of liberation contacts, which are the relationship with one's self, the relationship with others, and the relationship with the world (47). In the Lady's condition, she has no one to talk to and the only one who could help her to find liberation is herself. By the time she stops suppressing her feelings, she allows the sadness to surface in herself, which stimulates her to renew her opinion about the reality of her condition (Wyckoff 141) and accepts the fact that she can no longer cope with her oppressed situation. This also reflects how British women were subjected to marginalisation. They accepted their roles in society by being bound to their domestic lives and other types of occupations that still disregarded them in society, in which patience and tolerance were their intermediaries for suppression. Hence, through their relationship with other women who suffered the same treatment, and through education and experiences in their own "private sphere", they became strong and sought for equality and eventually redeemed themselves by gaining recognition in professions that served as fundamental occupations in a community.

Consequently, a woman who suppresses her thoughts in an oppressive environment must immediately analyse her weaknesses and capabilities. She must look for possibilities as to how she could establish herself to recognize her potentials, like the Lady of Shalott, who gained redemption by breaking the boundaries of marginalisation.

## **VI. Summary and discussion**

The poem "The Lady of Shalott" addresses the topic of marginalisation in British society of the Victorian period, specifically on how women were being treated. Since the poem has a medieval theme, the society of Victorian Britain could easily relate to the character of Lancelot from Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, who fortifies his signification of men's virility in his portrayal as one of the Knights of the Round Table, and through his illicit affair with the wife of King Arthur, Queen Guinevere. The situation corresponds to the Lady of Shalott's reaction when she witnesses the two young lovers who later married, prior to the presence of Lancelot. It is the only time she admits how weary she is in her isolation. Such loneliness at being ostracised from the outer world and bearing her skills for her alone to see, while trying to live normally,

makes her feel the post-suppression rebound effect. The more she suppresses herself, the more it generates in her consciousness the need to seek for freedom.

The factors that make the Lady channel her suppression include the weaving of the colourful web and the use of the “looking-glass self” effect. These factors give her satisfaction since she is isolated in the tower, and even though the images she sees are vague because they are just the “shadows of the world”, she could still produce a colourful creation through it. It just shows that she has the capability of making wonderful things, and that is what she provides in her private sphere. Moreover, she gets to recognize her inadequacy by realizing how she allows herself to be manipulated, since she just denies her oppressed way of living. These aspects serve as her foundation in building confidence within her “private sphere” and as she crosses into the “public sphere”. Hence, even if her liberation led to another sorrow, she would like to impart the message that a woman, like her, deserves to be a part of a society that caters equally for both men and women, especially when coming from the silent island of Shalott, which is overshadowed by the domineering and industrial place of Camelot; she indeed becomes the “pathbreaker of social change”.

The condition of the Lady of Shalott exactly parallels that of the women in previous periods of Britain. Their subjection to the “redundancy” of marriage and domesticity caused them to be bound in a “private sphere”. Even though their main role in society was to be domesticated, they still proved that they could acquire occupations that were reserved for men, mostly right after the plague in the fourteenth century. After all their hardship, their situation in society was still dire, but it raised their dignity and showed that they were valuable because they also earned a living to support their family, like their male counterparts. By the Renaissance period, society still considered women as feeble but gentle. Thomas Salter has different opinions towards women. Either they must learn the moral and natural philosophy of life or better not to learn it at all, since education could be used as a tool for cruelty to others. This implies that men’s perspectives toward women were shallow and insubstantial. Women are trying their best ability to gain social inclusion, but how they will gain it if even the right to education would be taken away from them?

Furthermore, as the Victorian era progressed, new industries that needed massive manpower emerged, which made working-class husbands work for long hours.

The situation of women was still appalling, because they were worried if the wage of their husbands would be enough to put food on their plates. However, the Victorian era also marked the start of feminism. While middle-class women were embroidering, they also met different people who had radical opinions about the situation of society. The occupations, such as governesses, midwives, and nurses were the professions that have not been performed by men since these are all related to womanhood at that time. Men became uneasy about this because they felt threatened by having competition when it came to the labour force. This could just have been a result of arrogance and envy because they did not want women to be recognized in society apart from being homemakers; and what they were truly concerned about was their value as the dominant gender since the professions of women were truly essential to the community. Men could not be employed in those kind occupations, either, because they still entailed domesticity, but in a more refined and vital way. This is how women eventually redeemed themselves; their diligence, tolerance, resilience, and suppression had paid off.

Succumbing to suppression indicates that a person is being oppressed. The defence mechanism of suppression is usually practiced by a person who likes to shield himself or herself from the injustices of his or her environment and who does not want to give way to anger. If a suppressed thought further enters the consciousness, the person must find a solution as to how he or she could resolve it, else, the person would experience a “post-suppression rebound effect” once it has not been acknowledged. It is important to recognize the person’s weaknesses and capabilities as to how he or she could resolve such issues. Historically and poetically, women who fought marginalisation acquired their redemption by not resorting to unthinkable decisions and actions.

## **VII. Conclusion**

The Lady of Shalott used suppression as a defence mechanism while she is being confined in the tower. Although she is primarily not concerned with her oppressive way of living, which is caused by the colourful creation that she produces in her loom, seeing only dull images from her mirror makes her imprisonment uncomfortable. Thus, the only time she fully acknowledges her oppression and isolation is when the image of

the two young lovers appears in the mirror. In addition, the presence of Lancelot makes her determined not to be controlled by somebody else, but rather to liberate herself and see the real colours of the world. She would rather take the risk of obtaining the curse than live within oppression. The suppressed thoughts that she keeps on blocking in her consciousness just completely surge forth and she gains the strength and confidence to find the vital reason to liberate herself from the tower. Moreover, since the Lady does not know what kind of curse was cast upon her, she identifies herself by writing her name on the prow of the boat, enclosing the name of her place so that people would recognize the metonymic island where she was marginalised due to gender restrictions of a gender specific society.

The situation of the Lady is the reflection of the very same condition of women in Victorian period. The poem clearly applies the metaphor and metonymy in having Camelot represent domineering masculinity, and Shalott representing submissive femininity. Thus, being domineering could lead to inconsideration towards other people that do not matter to them, but being submissive makes a person strive harder to understand what they are afraid of and how they could console themselves, and further prove what capabilities they have.

Historically, women were characterized as the “other” or a “lack”. While given the limitations of their bodies, such as pregnancy, they still deserve to have the same opportunities as men, specifically the right to an education. Thus, given the role as the preserver of morality, society must address these circumstances if they truly care for the good of people. Even though women endured gender inequality, which was constituted in the “redundancy” of marriage without equal rights in society, even to acquire occupations restricted to men, such as butcher, farmer and jail warden, etc.; they were later on acknowledged by being engaging in professions such as those of governesses, midwives, and nurses. These are the occupations that used to be designated within the “private sphere”, which served as a revelation that these vital roles for humanity are what women normally do. Stopping them from performing these professions even led them to gather and plan how to fight for their rights, which was the start of feminism. Ultimately, the capabilities of women, apart from being homemakers, are their redemption for gaining the recognition of their importance and significance in society.

Suppression as a self defence mechanism must only be used for a limited time. A person who experiences unfair treatment or oppression must not live in self-denial because a person must know how to express his or her thoughts immediately, and must be able to fight for his or her rights. Not doing so would make a person subject to “post-rebound effect”, wherein the more a person controls his or her neutral thoughts, the more they will surface or even surge into consciousness, and may not be handled in such consciousness properly and result in irrational behaviour.

The Lady of Shalott and other women who became victims of marginalisation in a gender specific society had succumbed to suppression. It had been a winding course for them to take, but they eventually gained confidence and strength as they crossed the barriers of their oppressive environment. They certainly achieved justice in gender equality by maximizing their potential in society, which gave them redemption for all the hardships they had endured.

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