

Reader-Text Interaction and Gadamer's Hermeneutical Circle: Formation of Meaning in Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott*

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Abstract

This research paper explores Alfred Lord Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" through the lens of Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic circle and counts the major elements that influence the reader's interpretation in the circular interpretive journey. By applying Gadamer's perspective, which emphasizes the cyclical relationship between the whole and the parts of a text, this study examines how the poem's structural and thematic elements contribute to its meaning. The paper investigates the interplay between the poem's language and symbolism, existential themes, and intertextuality in shaping the reader's understanding of the poem. Through Gadamer's framework, this study provides a comprehensible analysis of the implicit themes of "The Lady of Shalott" to reveal deeper insights into its poetic complexities.

Keywords: The Lady of Shalott, Tennyson, Gadamer, Hermeneutical circle, Victorian age

Introduction

The Victorian era, spanning the reign of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1901, was a time of unprecedented transformation in Britain. It witnessed the rise of the industrial revolution, urbanization, and the expansion of the British Empire. It was also an age of social reform, with movements advocating for women's rights, workers' rights, and the abolition of slavery. Amidst this backdrop of rapid change and progress, literature served as a mirror to society by offering insight into its hopes, fears, and aspirations. One of the greatest artists of this era is Alfred Lord Tennyson who stands as a towering figure in the rich tapestry of Victorian literature whose works marked by its tense confrontation with the past, the present and the future, overshadowed the Victorian period [1]. Regarding the importance of Alfred Tennyson, Harold Bloom writes, the people of the Victorian age seemed to have found at last a poet who promised not only to combine the cunning melody of Moore, the rich fulness of Keats, and the simplicity of Wordsworth, but one who was introducing a method of observing nature different from that of all the three and yet succeeding in everything which they had attempted, often in vain [2]. One of the Tennyson's well-known works is "The Lady of Shalott". "The Lady of Shalott" is considered a masterpiece of Victorian poetry for its evocative language and beautifully describing the elements of the Victorian period. The poem tells the story of a mysterious woman who is cursed to weave a magic web in a secluded tower, forbidden from looking directly at the outside world. Instead, she views the world through a mirror, weaving images of what she sees into her tapestry. However, when she glimpses the gallant Sir Lancelot passing by, she is overcome by the desire to see him directly, defying the curse. As a consequence, she sets out on a doomed journey down the river to Camelot, where she meets her tragic end. There has been so many debates regarding the meaning and the content "The Lady of Shalott" conveys as it invites the readers to ponder the mysteries of love, fate, and the quest for meaning therefore it is kind of poem that "acknowledges the poet's and the reader's dilemma" [3]. Before explaining the major considerations of the poem and the dilemmas, I shall explore the main themes and conditions the poem concern. In the Victorian era there was a lot of effort putting into the rights of women and the discourse was to find a way in assigning some major social roles to them but despite all that the women were suppressed and isolated due to the social norms. Accordingly, this ground supports the notion that the poem presents a commentary of Victorian women, in which their gendered and assigned roles were that of domesticity and suppression [4]. As well as the women, the artistic atmosphere of the era was not so pleasant for the men of letters who tried to encounter the society in the figure of a prophet but were rejected by the unintelligible people of the time. In this sense one of the major attributions of this poem like other early poems of Tennyson, is concerned with the role of the artist [5]. Tennyson's description of the isolated lady who weaves a magic web in her captivity and the journey to Camelot where she confronts the outer people and finds her tragic death, can parallel with

the image of an artist or poet of the Victorian age and shows the poet coming before the public fully conscious of how much is amiss [5]. The accounts provided here are based on the historical and cultural backgrounds in which the poem was written and are essential in interpreting the text. Considering the historical context is crucial for literary analysis as it provides insights into the author's motivations, societal expectations, and the cultural backdrop against which the text was crafted. Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" can be seen as a product of its time, and by contextualizing the poem within Victorian England, we can gain a deeper understanding of the thematic nuances and socio-cultural resonances embedded in the work. For this purpose, I will put "The Lady of Shalott" within the context of Gadamer's Hermeneutic circle to demonstrate what elements in the circular process of interpretation influence the understanding of both individual elements and the entire poetic work and how the reader's engagement with the text shapes and is shaped by the interpretative journey.

Gadamer's Hermeneutical Circle

Gadamer's Hermeneutical Circle, inspired by the concept of philosophical Hermeneutics in Heidegger and Schleiermacher's thought, is a fundamental concept in the field of philosophical hermeneutics and is an approach to understanding and interpreting texts that focuses on the dynamic and recursive relationship between the whole and its parts. Generally speaking, hermeneutical circle suggests that we can only understand the parts of a text, or any body of meaning, out of a general idea of its whole, yet we can only gain this understanding of the whole by understanding its parts therefore, it is the idea that we always understand or interpret out of some presuppositions [6]. In the Hermeneutic Circle, Gadamer argues that interpreters bring their own preconceptions which he refers to as "prejudices" to the interpretive process. These prejudices shape how one understands the text and play a crucial role in the hermeneutic process. yet, for Gadamer the task is not to escape the realm of prejudices, which is deemed impossible and pointless, but to develop the right ones, that is, those that enable us to hear what the other part has to say [6]. One of the key elements of interpreting the text for Gadamer in Hermeneutical circle is the historical and cultural context that means considering the circumstances of its creation as well as how it has been received and interpreted over time. In a way, Hermeneutical circle demonstrates that Interpretation is a dialogue between the interpreter and the text which involves questioning assumptions and exploring different perspectives therefore, this dialogue allows the interpreter to see beyond the initial prejudices and reach a more comprehensive understanding. Gadamer also emphasizes that a person who is trying to understand a text always projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning [7] so, the interpretation is an open-ended activity which with the passage of time might change due to the interpreter's preconceptions or as Gadamer puts it "prejudices". Putting "The Lady of Shalott" into Gadamer's hermeneutical circle allows us to appreciate the fluidity and complexity of interpretation and enables us to understand that meaning is constructed through an ongoing dialogue between the reader and the text. In the following sections this paper will discuss the features that can be considered as major interpretive parts of the text that play an observable role in interpreting "The Lady of Shalott".

Language and Symbolism in "The Lady of Shalott"

Tennyson uses language and poetic devices, including symbolism, to evoke the world of medieval romance so, by dissecting the linguistic nuances, we can uncover layers of meaning and emotional resonance that add depth to the reader's interpretative experience. The first attribute of Tennyson's language that the reader encounters in the poem is its descriptive style that creates vivid imagery as seen in the opening stanza "On either side the river lie / Long fields of barley and of rye" and other lines of the poem which describe the setting and environment in which the story of the poem is accruing. Tennyson's use of repetition is another aspect of his language style which emphasize certain aspects of the story, such as the repeated lines "The Lady of Shalott" throughout the poem. This repetition draws attention to the protagonist and her mysterious presence. Additionally, the poem includes instances of alliteration, as seen in "reapers reaping early," which adds musicality and rhythm to the lines and enhances the overall poetic structure. In terms of poetic rhyme, Tennyson employs a consistent rhyme scheme (AAAA, BBBB, etc.) and a regular meter (primarily iambic tetrameter) which gives the poem a musical and flowing quality. The poem's narrative structure, with its shifts between the third-person omniscient perspective and the Lady's own voice, creates a sense of distance and intimacy that can influence the reader's interpretation. Analyzing how the narrative structure shapes the reader's engagement with the text can reveal additional layers of meaning. There are also considerable numbers of symbolic elements in the poem such as the mirror, the web, the island, Camelot, and sir Lancelot which carry a specific meaning that contributes to the overall thematic framework and can be interpreted in variety of ways in the interpretive journey the hermeneutical circle suggests. Regarding hermeneutical circle, symbols, as integral components of the text, contribute to the ongoing dialogue between the reader's initial pre-understandings and the evolving interpretation influenced by successive encounters with the symbols. By applying Gadamer's framework, we can understand how the interpretation of individual symbols informs the reader's understanding of the broader symbolic tapestry and provides a more comprehensive grasp of the poem's meaning.

Existential Themes in “The Lady of Shalott”

Hermeneutical circle with its emphasis on the dynamic relationship between reader and text, finds resonance with existential ideas therefore examining the existential themes that are implicit in the poem allows us to uncover more profound layers of meaning embedded in “The Lady of Shalott” and how the poem invites readers to grapple with their own existential inquiries. The first tangible existential theme in the poem is existential isolation. The theme of existential isolation is evident from the beginning of the poem, as the Lady of Shalott lives alone on her island, cut off from the rest of the world. She is surrounded by fields and water, but she remains disconnected from society. This mode of being alone in experience and not sharing interpretations, perceptions, and reactions with the outside world arise the feeling of existential isolation [8]. The Lady's isolation is further emphasized by her way of living. She weaves a web based on images she sees in her mirror but she cannot engage with the world directly. This isolation leads the Lady to long for existential authenticity that is to accept her “essential finitude, freedom, and responsibility” [9] and choosing her ownmost potentialities by realizing and actualizing them in concrete moments. The Lady's yearning for authenticity becomes evident when she hears the sound of Sir Lancelot singing and is drawn to see him directly. Despite the curse that confines her, she chooses to break away from her artificial existence and experience life authentically: “She left the web, she left the loom, / She made three paces through the room”. This moment symbolizes her desire to transcend her limitations and connect with the world on her own terms. As mentioned earlier, Tennyson's poem is often associated with gender roles in the Victorian age therefore, as an existential dimension the poem's exploration of gender roles and the challenges faced by women in Victorian society are crucial to understanding the Lady's predicament and the societal constraints that she represents. Christine Poulson discusses a feminist viewpoint and suggests, “the Lady of Shalott's escape from her tower as an act of defiance, a symbol of female empowerment” allows the Lady of Shalott to emotionally break free and come to terms with female sexuality [10]. Examining the gender dynamics in the poem can shed light on the broader cultural and historical context that informs the reader's interpretation. another important existential theme that is vivid in the poem is being towards death. The motif of death, both literal and metaphorical, plays a significant role in the interpretation of the poem. The Lady's tragic end after leaving her loom symbolizes the price she pays for succumbing to temptation and defying societal norms, reflecting the idea that stepping out of isolation can lead to destruction or the end of artistic practice. As Poulson declares, in death the Lady has become a Sleeping Beauty who can never be awakened, symbols of perfect feminine passivity [10]. Applying Gadamer's hermeneutical circle to the exploration of existential themes such as isolation, gender and sexuality, and death in “The Lady of Shalott” shows how the interpretation is shaped by the continuous interplay between the reader's preconceptions and the unfolding narrative. By tracing the reader's journey through the hermeneutical circle, we can uncover how Tennyson's portrayal of existential themes prompts a reflective engagement with the text that invites readers to confront and contemplate their own existential concerns.

Intertextuality in “The Lady of Shalott”¹

Intertextual references in “The Lady of Shalott” contribute to the hermeneutical circle by introducing additional layers of meaning and complexity to the interpretation. As readers encounter references to other texts or cultural symbols, their pre-understandings are influenced by these intertextual connections. “Intertextuality” is a term that was coined by Kristeva, who designates the possible relationships between a given text with other texts [11]. Starting from line 37 of the poem, we can find two strong intertextual references, Penelope from Homer's *Odyssey* and Arachne, from Greek mythology. Penelope was the wife of Odysseus, who had to leave her in order to fight in the Trojan War. She remained faithful to her husband, waiting for twenty years for his return. During this time, she had to keep her suitors away by pretending to weave her father-in-law's shroud, unstitching the fabric each night to prolong the wait for the men who wish to marry her [12]. As it is evident in the poem, the lady of Shalott is also a weaver who spends her time weaving to entertain herself, because there is nothing she can do in the isolated tower. In addition, both women can be considered as symbols of loyalty and fidelity for Penelope waits for her husband for years, similarly, the Lady of Shalott waits in her tower weaving while she resists the temptations found in the outside world. Further on, because the Lady is a weaver, we can compare the lady of Shalott with Arachne. March describes the young Lydian woman as a famous weaver, who was known even by the nymphs and the gods and challenged Athena, as she was considered the goddess of crafts, to a contest [12]. The work of the girl angered Athena and caused her to break the tissue into pieces and also attack the young woman. Arachne, who could not bear this encounter, considered suicide, but the goddess took pity on her and turned her into a spider so that she could continue weaving her webs in peace. In Tennyson's poem, the Lady can be seen as a parallel to Arachne in terms of her artistic talent and defiance of societal norms and both pay the price for their audacity and meeting a tragic end. Since the lady is condemned to observe life through the reflections in a mirror, a comparison could be made between Plato's allegory of the cave and the poem by Tennyson. Both the cave allegory and “The Lady of Shalott” share the theme of illusion versus reality because in the cave, the prisoners perceive the shadows on the wall as reality, and the same happens to the Lady in her tower, where the shadows are substituted with reflections, that is, an indirect and distorted view of reality. If the lady, who is “half

¹ The content of this part is mainly inspired by an unpublished paper retrieved from academia.com entitled “intertextuality in Tennyson's “The Lady of Shalott”” by Martina Manzano García.

sick of shadows" (line 71) looks through the window, she will unleash her curse, which can be related to the myth of Pandora's box. Pandora was the first woman created out of earth and water by Hephaestus, and she is considered the cause of all mankind's horrors and woes, "For Pandora brought with her as dowry a great jar in which were stored sorrows and diseases and hard labour, previously unknown among men. When she opened the lid of her jar, these poured out and spread over all the earth, so that mortals would never again be free of them. Only hope remained in the jar, still in man's own control, to be some kind of consolation for all the troubles that Pandora had let loose on the world" [12]. It should be taken into consideration that Pandora's jar became confused with the golden box that Psyche was forbidden to open. Continuing with Psyche, it can also be related to the lady of Shalott, since she breaks her promise not to look at her husband, Cupid or Eros, and by looking at him, she condemns herself to wander looking for her husband, having to overcome the tests of the goddess Venus, mother of Cupid, which leads to her death. "The Lady of Shalott" also suffers the consequences of looking directly at her loved one, Sir Lancelot, so it can be said that curiosity killed these female characters. In the third part of the poem, the introduction of Sir Lancelot is another indication of intertextuality. Lancelot is "The most famous of Arthur's knights. Raised by the Lady of the Lake he joined the court at Camelot and became Arthur's best and bravest until his tragic affair with Arthur's wife, Guinevere, which precipitated the collapse of Arthur's kingdom" [13]. In "The Lady of Shalott", he represents the temptation that makes the Lady of Shalott look through the window and suffer the consequences of her curse. On line 107, the following is found: "Tirra lirra," by the river Sang Sir Lancelot" which is a reference to Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, where Autolycus sings: "The lark, that tirra-lirra chants" [14]. Tennyson's skillful use of these influences and connection to Arthurian legend, medieval romance, classical myths, and its Victorian context creates a narrative that resonates with readers across different time periods and invites varied interpretations based on Gadamer's Hermeneutical circle.

Reader's role in interpretation

As explored in the paper, the reader's role in interpretation within the hermeneutical circle is dynamic and multifaceted. By actively engaging with the text and navigating between the parts and the whole, considering contextual factors, and actively participating in the meaning-making process, readers contribute significantly to the interpretive journey. Through this iterative and reflective process, readers enhance their understanding of texts, in this case *The Lady of Shalott*, and embrace the complexity and richness of the interpretation within the hermeneutical circle. The reader's interpretation is not merely about uncovering the author's intentions but about establishing genuine connections between the reader, the text, and the context in which the interpretation occurs because "the setting helps us understand the text and the text, on the other hand, may help us see the setting in a new light, which in turn may change the reader's interpretation of the text" [15].

Conclusion

In conclusion, examining "The Lady of Shalott" through Gadamer's hermeneutical circle revealed the intricate interplay between the text's historical context and its literary elements. By approaching Tennyson's poem from the perspective of Gadamer's hermeneutics, we gained a deeper understanding of how the narrative constructs and conveys its existential themes, symbols, and intertextuality. The poem's observable interplay between reality and artistic representation emerges as a critical element in its broader commentary on the relationship between the artist and the world. This dynamic under-score the notion of interpretation as an evolving process, shaped by the interplay between the reader's own horizons and the historical and cultural layers embedded within the text. Ultimately, "The Lady of Shalott" becomes a rich example for exploring how artistic vision and existential themes intersect and offer readers a multifaceted lens through which to engage with the complexities of the human experience.

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