What is Life Without Love?

The story of Rapunzel is one of a princess who was born shortly after her mother was rescued from death’s door by drinking a magic potion obtained from a rare golden bloom. Before the queen fell ill, only one person in the kingdom knew of the location of the one and only flower with the magical powers. That person was Mother Gothel. Before the flower was taken to save the queen’s life she had used its magical powers to preserve her youth. When she found out the flower was no longer there for her to avail herself of its power, Mother Gothel was furious. She found that she could obtain the same results using Rapunzel’s beautiful golden hair, so she stole her away from the palace and imprisoned her in a “…tall, tall tower” (Smiley). Rapunzel was held prisoner by Mother Gothel until just before her eighteenth birthday when she was rescued. The renowned fairy tale is similar in several ways to “The Lady of Shalott” by Tennyson. Both were kept in a tower and were forbidden to leave. Both had only a very small view of the world from a window high up in a tower, although The Lady of Shalott only saw the view from the window in the reflection of the mirror she used for weaving. Tennyson movingly illustrates the message that isolation and life without love is the true curse of The Lady of Shalott. This message is also illustrated in not only the story of Rapunzel, but also in other fairy tales, among which is Snow White and Sleeping Beauty.

Snow White was always cheerful and kind, but her step mother, the Queen, was jealous and cruel to Snow White. “She forced the princess to dress in rags and work from dawn to dusk”
(Disney). Although Snow White spent her days alone and isolated working for the Queen, she never lost hope or became discouraged. Tennyson’s Lady of Shalott was even more isolated than Snow White because she was utterly alone without even an evil step-mother. This can be seen as Tennyson portrays her aloneness so eloquently with these words: “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?” (Tennyson, L. 24-27). From this description the reader understands that no one has even noticed her as she stands by the window endlessly weaving.

Another similarity between the two is they both have a desire for someone to love. Snow White longed for a prince as “Day after day she dreamed of a prince who would come and carry her off to his castle” (Disney). Because of her isolation The Lady of Shalott knew no human companionship at all, that is until she spied two young lovers passing by. The sight of them awakened a longing she had never experienced before. “Or when the moon was over head, / Came two young lovers lately wed: / ‘I’m half sick of shadows’ said / The lady of Shalott” (Tennyson, L. 69-72). However, even though they were similar in their desire for an intimate relationship, their stories concluded in dramatically different circumstances.

Just as the story of Snow White depicted a life of isolation and life without love, so does the tale of Sleeping Beauty. Shortly after the birth of Princess Aurora, an evil witch put a curse on the child. Even though the good fairy, Merryweather, put forth her best effort to undo the curse, the king still feared for Aurora’s safety so the good fairies designed a plan to thwart Maleficent’s curse. “They would take Aurora to live with them deep in the woods, safe from Maleficent” (Teitelbrum). The Lady of Shalott, unlike Aurora, had no other option but isolation because she had heard a rumor about a curse. “She has heard a whisper say, / A curse is on her if she stay / To look down to Camelot. / She knows not what the curse may be, / And so she
weaveth steadily” (Tennyson, L. 39 – 43). These stories differ in that Aurora’s parents knew for sure that she was cursed and were trying to protect her, while The Lady of Shalott had only heard a rumor that if she left her loom she would be cursed and for fear she stayed.

Both The Lady of Shalott and Aurora were captivated by a man; one could even say it was love at first sight. Although their stories differ they both experienced a desire for that one who would complete them. After Aurora’s birth she was promised in marriage to Prince Phillip, the son of her father’s friend, King Hubert. She was unaware of the betrothal when she met a handsome young man in the woods on her sixteenth birthday. When she returned from picking berries “… the fairies gave Briar Rose her birthday surprises. Then Briar Rose told them that she had fallen in love” (Teitelbrum). Similarly The Lady of Shalott experienced the same feeling as Aurora when she saw the face of Sir Lancelot as “He flashed into the crystal mirror” (Tennyson, L. 106) before which she was weaving. She knew when she saw him there was more to life than just watching others dim reflections in a mirror. The sight of Sir Lancelot and the feelings this evoked gave her the courage she needed to take the risk and leave her loom.

Tragically, Tennyson’s tale of The Lady of Shalott ends quite differently than the tales of Rapunzel, Aurora, and Snow White, who all lived “happily ever after.” Perhaps she did not even consider the possibility that she could live happily ever after. Maybe the isolation of living alone in the tower for so many years caused her to create the curse in her imagination because she did not know what it was like to be happy and believed she did not deserve love. Sir Lancelot was even captivated by her beauty when “He said, ‘She has a lovely face’” (Tennyson, L. 169) as she floated down the river to her death. If only she had not had such a fatalistic outlook. Who knows? Maybe the Lady of Shallot could have lived happily ever after just like Rapunzel, Sleeping Beauty, and Snow White.
Works Cited


