Is This the Real Life? Is This Just Fantasy? : Comparing
Tennyson’s ‘The Lady of Shalott’ and “Snow White”

Do you ever contemplate escaping reality? Many people all over the world have their own way of escaping the burden and stress of everyday life. From reading books, to watching television, to playing video games, everyone has their own way of escaping reality; even if they don’t realize they are doing it. This escapism that we perform is what keeps us from being overwhelmed by the pressures of everyday life. In the poem “The Lady of Shalott” by Alfred Lord Tennyson, the main character escapes the reality of her life through a mirror, and the endless weaving work she does. She believes she is cursed if she should ever leave the world she knows, so she endlessly works to the bone every day of her life. Much like “The Lady of Shalott”, “Snow White” is a tale of an evil queen who escapes the reality of her life by speaking to a magic mirror that disenchants her. In both “The Lady of Shalott” and “Snow White,” the characters struggle with their fixation on the world they think they know, and come to a realization that the world they are living in isn’t reality, but was what held them together. Their similar message and symbolism is what sets them apart from other stories of magic mirrors or curses. As we delve deeper into both stories, we discover that they have more in common than most knew.
In “The Lady of Shalott,” the “Lady” is depicted in a tower high above the town of Camelot. She is unlike many others of her time, and endlessly weaves with no desire of stopping; if she ever thought of such a thing, she would unravel her curse, and she would die. According to Carol Christ, “If she looks directly at Sir Lancelot, she cracks the mirror through which she sees herself and the world that she pictures in her web, but if she looks only at the mirror's magic sights, she limits herself to a word (world) of shadows in which she cannot know or be known” (388). In this way, it explains exactly what would happen to the “Lady” if she ever stopped weaving. The life that lives is solely based in the dream world between the mirror she continually watches, and the weaving that never stops.

However, as Lancelot arrives into Camelot, problems arise for the “Lady,” as she has never truly noticed any of the other “shadows.” Lancelot is different to her. When she notices him, she is slowly breaking away for the world she has always known. “She saw the helmet and the plume./She looked down to Camelot./Out flew the web and floated wide;/the mirror cracked from side to side;” (Tennyson 112-115). The more the “Lady” becomes a part of reality, and the farther she strays from her work and her mirror, the closer she is to her end. Truly, the “Lady” brought her curse on herself. She knows that the farther she goes, the closer she gets to the fate that lies ahead. Yet, she knows she can’t turn back now; she has come too far into reality to turn back to what she knew before.

In the fairy tale story of “Snow White,” the evil queen (her stepmother) attempts to overtake and control Snow White’s life through the power she gains from the magic mirror on the wall. As she can see everything that takes place through the mirror, and
gains all of her confidence through it, she lives in a world outside of reality; she lives through the mirror rather than real life. According to Vanessa Joosen, “An instance during which magic intervenes in the Grimms’ tale of “Snow White” is the occurrence of the magic mirror, a speaking object that has an overview of all the lands over which Snow White’s father rules, and that knows things that the queen herself does not…” (232). The evil queen is constantly spying on Snow White as she goes about her day, because she’s so jealous of her that she can’t do anything but watch every move she makes. She doesn’t like her, and she obviously doesn’t trust her. She is constantly checking to see what Snow is doing and constantly asking the mirror about her looks. Her jealousy is what makes her want to kill Snow White because she wants to be the “fairest of them all.” According to Michelle Ann Abate, “The fairy tale is not about the rivalry between two women but rather about the competing personalities within one woman” (p.184). The evil queen relies on the magic mirror for every need, and as it informs her that she is no longer the most beautiful in the land, she plans to kill the only person inhibiting her from staying on top. In her dream world, all of this makes sense; to kill off an innocent girl that never bothered her. Yet, in reality, she is only fighting within herself. She is fighting the Snow White that lives inside of her, the pure side that would keep everything simple and clean; that just isn’t the way things work with this evil queen. Her dream world became her reality.

The third point that is important to mention when comparing the two is their prominent color imagery. Three important colors commonly mentioned in “Snow White” are white, red and black. In “The Lady of Shalott,” many colors are used to symbolize the outside world that the “Lady” sees and weaves into her tapestry. The color white in
“Snow White” refers to “her personality and demeanor as pure and innocent. Snow is seen as a purifying element that covers the world in white and then washes everything away” (JMK 2008). This is important in the story, as Snow White is pure and harmless, and that is one of the reasons that her stepmother is so jealous and wants to kill her. It drove the evil queen insane to know that Snow White was always more like because of her purity and charm. In the “Lady of Shalott,” white is mentioned as a sign of purity and innocence. In line 136, “Lying robed in snowy white/ That loosely flew to left and right-/ The leaves upon her falling light-/ Through the noises of the night/ She floated down to Camelot;” (Tennyson 136-139). This is significant in this story as this is when the reader finds out that the “Lady” dies an innocent death; all she wanted was to see the world as it truly was.

As red comes into play, we see its importance clearly in “Snow White.” Red is the color of the apple that is used to kill her, symbolizing blood and revenge. Yet, according to JMK, this can also suggest sexuality, “With her red lips, Snow White displays a sexual passion that contrasts her white skin, her innocence” (JMK 2008). Not only is she a symbol of innocence, but she only plays the role of the evil queen’s sexual jealousy. In “The Lady of Shalott,” red is also signified as a sexual symbol, “A red-cross knight forever kneeled/ To a lady in his shield, / That sparkled on the yellow field, / Beside remote Shalott” (Tennyson, 78-81). In this way, Lancelot (the knight), is a new interest to the “Lady”, a sexual desire that throws her completely off track. Not to mention that if Lancelot had never rode into Camelot, the “Lady” may never have met such a fate as she had. Lastly, there’s comes the symbolism of black. In literature, black is generally symbolized as, “a cold and negative aspect suggesting passivity, death, ignorance, or
evil” (Dr. Louis, 2008). In “Snow White,” we see this quite prominently, as the evil queen attempts to kill Snow White three times, and how she is obviously evil. In “The Lady of Shalott”, black is mentioned when speaking on Lancelot. Tennyson says, “From underneath his helmet flowed/ His coal-black curls as on he rode, / As he rode down to Camelot” (Tennyson, 102-104). This could symbolize the “Lady” and her fate that arises after Lancelot’s arrival. He is ultimately a symbol of her death. In all of these ways, these three colors play a big part in this literature.

To conclude, in many ways, the stories of “Snow White” and “The Lady of Shalott” have many comparisons that most people wouldn’t normally notice. With their similar color imagery, and their closely related themes, they show exactly how the magic of mirrors and curses can ultimately decide fate in these stories. In both stories, the characters struggle with understanding the worlds they think they know, and the reality of the real world. In both cases, the world they knew was what held them together and as they begin to breach to reality, they crumble under their inevitable fate. If you had to decide, would you choose the dream world or reality?
Works Cited


