

**DISTORTING REALITY THROUGH THE CRYSTAL MIRROR:  
DIALOGUE BETWEEN LITERATURE AND PAINTING IN  
WATERHOUSE'S REPRESENTATIONS OF THE LADY OF SHALOTT**

**DISTORSIONANDO LA REALIDAD EN EL ESPEJO DE CRISTAL:  
DIÁLOGO ENTRE LITERATURA Y PINTURA EN LAS  
REPRESENTACIONES DE LA LADY OF SHALOTT DE WATERHOUSE**

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ABSTRACT

“The Lady of Shalott” is a lyrical ballad written by the English Victorian poet Alfred Tennyson. There have been a wide variety of interpretations of this poem. It has also been a source of inspiration for various artistic expressions, such as art, literature, and music. The purpose of this paper is to examine the process of reverse ekphrasis in two paintings produced by the painter John William Waterhouse: *The Lady of Shalott* and *I Am Half-Sick of Shadows, Said the Lady of Shalott*. On the other hand, Nicole (Nick) Loven’s film adaptation of the poem incorporates a circular intertextuality process that revolves around the interaction between images and words. Thus, the narrated text becomes a visual image. The conversion stage of the process of reverse ekphrasis, in which Tennyson’s source text is transformed into Waterhouse’s

target text, depends on a specific moment depicted in the poem “The Lady of Shalott,” as conveyed through the lady’s words. Waterhouse’s intertextual dialogue with Tennyson’s poem involves a process of reverse ekphrasis. This interaction between image and word is later transformed into another visual representation. The word transformed into an image is then converted back into an image using a film version.

KEYWORDS: reverse ekphrasis; Victorian poetry; Pre-Raphaelite painting; film adaptation; circular intertextuality

## RESUMEN

“La Dama de Shalott” es una balada lírica escrita por el poeta victoriano inglés Alfred Tennyson. Ha habido una amplia variedad de interpretaciones de este poema, y también ha sido una fuente de inspiración para muchas manifestaciones artísticas, incluidos arte, literatura y música. El propósito de este trabajo es examinar el proceso de écfrasis inversa en dos pinturas producidas por el pintor John William Waterhouse, *The Lady of Shalott* y *I Am Half-Sick of Shadows, Said the Lady of Shalott*. También se puede observar que la versión fílmica de Nicole (Nick) Loven del poema supone un proceso de intertextualidad circular basado en el diálogo entre la imagen y la palabra. Así, el texto narrado se convierte en una imagen visual. La etapa de conversión del proceso de écfrasis inversa, a través de la cual el texto fuente de Tennyson se convierte en el texto objetivo de Waterhouse, se basa en un momento que se muestra en el poema “La Dama de Shalott”, mediado por las palabras de la dama. El diálogo intertextual de Waterhouse con el poema de Tennyson implica un proceso de écfrasis inversa. Esta interacción entre imagen y palabra se convierte posteriormente en otra expresión visual. La palabra transformada en una imagen se vuelve a convertir en una imagen utilizando una versión cinematográfica.

PALABRAS CLAVE: écfrasis inversa; poesía victoriana; pintura prerrafaelita; adaptación cinematográfica; intertextualidad circular

## 1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The aim of this article is to examine the concept of reverse ekphrasis in two paintings by John William Waterhouse, *The Lady of Shalott* and *I Am Half-Sick of Shadows, said the Lady of*

*Shalott*. This analysis explores the relationship between words and visuals, specifically focusing on the cyclical intertextuality seen in Nicole Loven's adaptation of the poem into a fictionalized film format. This method consists of transforming Tennyson's poetry into a painting by Waterhouse, which was subsequently modified by Loven to create a film. Ekphrasis is the act of using language to describe a visual artwork. The term originates from the Greek language and signifies "description". Reverse ekphrasis is a method that entails producing a second artwork by employing a reverse process, which serves as a practical implementation of the *ut pictura poesis* theory (Bublíková, 2013: 30); it is the representation of a written piece using visual methods. Initially confined to the interaction between painting and poetry and its reciprocal influence, numerous critics have subsequently expanded the scope of this concept to include the tableau vivant, theatricalization, and filmic ekphrasis.

Alfred Tennyson, a renowned poet from the Victorian era, authored the poetic ballad "The Lady of Shalott". The text was included in a collection of 12 narrative poems titled *The Idylls of the King*, which reinterpreted the Arthurian tale and the destiny of his kingdom. Multiple exegeses have been proposed regarding Tennyson's poems. An influential viewpoint examines the clash between the artist's sensory outlook and his character's longing for direct encounters with life. The Romantic poets who came before Tennyson, a Victorian poet, also influenced him. The Romantic focus on personal sentiment, the natural world, and the mystical is evident in "The Lady of Shalott," specifically in its examination of the lady's seclusion and longing for a livelier existence outside her fortress. Moreover, examining the constrained patterns of behaviour and restrictions imposed on women throughout the Victorian era can offer further insight into comprehending "The Lady of Shalott". The story was a popular theme among artists during the nineteenth century and can be traced back to Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Furthermore, the poem functioned as a catalyst for diverse artistic expressions, encompassing music, visual art, and literature. Because of this curse, the narrative undergoes metamorphosis into a mythical tale of artistic creativity. The poet directly confronts reality, yet he must perceive it through the filter of imagination to assimilate it into the essence of his poetry (Culler, 1977:46). The narrative of "The Lady of Shalott" can also be interpreted as a parable of the complex interplay between poetry and mundane existence. The maiden's seclusion from the external realm is the main factor enabling her artistic pursuit. The imposition of this constraint, both imperative and inescapable, has a profound impact on artistic creation. Hence, the poem implies that poetry and society inherently diverge (Bristow, 2000: 28). Some have construed it as a rendition of Plato's Allegory of the Cave, implying that the artwork,

particularly the tapestry crafted by the Lady, is simply a duplicate of reality (Culler 1977: 46). However, the prevailing interpretation is to perceive the Lady of Shalott as a symbolic embodiment of isolation and restrictions within her harsh private sanctuary. This pertains to the encounters of women throughout the Victorian era who were subjected to such circumstances. Furthermore, the poem delves into the perils linked to feminine imaginative invention and the potential upheaval it presents to the established patriarchal hierarchy, in which the masculine perspective dominates the female realm (Doménech 2010: 203).

The phrase *ut pictura poesis*, coined by Horace, has been often employed to demonstrate the parallel connection between the visual and verbal forms of artistic expression. The enduring interdependence of painting and literature has generated divergent perspectives among critics and artists over the years. In his *Paragone of Painting*, Leonardo da Vinci asserted that painting is superior to poetry and argued that it transcends all other human creations with its intricate contemplations (2014: 653). He contended that the painting's explicit visual representations, created by the artist, have greater potency in contrast to the abstract conceptual representations of poetry, which depend on the reader's interpretation. Conversely, certain academics, like the German scholar Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, advocated for the distinction between painting and poetry as separate kinds of art. According to Osbert Sitwell, there are instances where the parallels between poetry and paintings made by various poets and painters extend beyond the core of their distinct creations and encompass aspects of technique as well (Sitwell, 1941: 47). When considering the media of painting and literature, it is challenging to determine which discipline is superior, as both should be recognised as separate domains. Stephen Cheeke's notion, outlined in his book *Writing for Art*, proposes an investigation into the media that most accurately portrays reality (Cheeke, 2008: 5). Cheeke contends that poems concerning paintings can be regarded as interpretations (2008: 1), wherein paintings function as visual representations that facilitate a comprehensive analysis and portrayal of the depicted characters. The current discourse among artists and critics revolves around the question of whether poetry or painting holds greater artistic merit. For centuries, critics have used Horace's parallel to argue that poetry should replicate nature in the same way that art does. The most tangible manifestation of *ut pictura poesis* can be observed in the ancient practice of ekphrasis, which entails the lyrical depiction of real or fictional artworks. Steiner (1988: 14) suggests that in this particular tradition, poets strive to attain the enduring quality of static paintings or express their frustration at being unable to do so.

Every medium has different characteristics. Their collaboration elicits a range of interpretations and insights, rendering it a captivating and intellectually stimulating field of study. Poetry and art differ fundamentally in their methods of communication. A painting uses visual components such as colour, composition, texture, and perspective to communicate ideas, emotions, and tales without relying on verbal language. Each media possesses different characteristics that enable it to explore various aspects of human experience and perception. The coexistence or collaboration of poetry and art generates a synergy that surpasses the unique capacities of each medium. In contrast, a poem that draws inspiration from a painting might add additional levels of significance and heightened emotional intensity to the artwork, whereas a painting that is influenced by a poem can offer a visual representation that enriches the reader's comprehension of the text. This engagement facilitates a more comprehensive and immersive experience that actively involves both cognitive and affective aspects. The interaction between poetry and painting can provide a wide range of interpretations. When a poet derives inspiration from a painting, they may direct their attention towards many elements, such as the atmosphere, symbolism, or historical background of the artwork. Likewise, a painter who interprets a poem has the ability to highlight specific themes, characters, or visual metaphors. These versions enhance the original source material and showcase the adaptability and evolution of both media. Academics and creative individuals have explored this abundant field to reveal the ways in which these media impact and enhance each other. Research in this field may involve comparative examinations of artworks and their literary equivalents, evaluations of artistic movements that blend poetry and painting (such as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood), or inquiries into the function of ekphrasis in poetry. The interaction between poetry and painting enhances our comprehension of both forms and intensifies our admiration for the limitless potential that emerges when the arts intersect. This aspect of inquiry is highly captivating and offers continuous rewards for both artists and researchers.

The Pre-Raphaelites exhibited a profound fascination for the notion of sister arts. Their belief was that by combining several artistic media, they might produce art that is both emotionally evocative and intellectually engaging. The integration of the sister arts was a crucial aspect of the pre-Raphaelite movement and had a lasting impact on the wider artistic scene in subsequent years. One of the fundamental aspects of the Pre-Raphaelite movement was the rejuvenation of the connection between painting and poetry. Painting and poetry were combined through two separate methodologies. An alternative method was initially devised, wherein a piece of art in one medium was enhanced by a piece of art in another medium,

resulting in a dual artwork that incorporates both poetic and pictorial elements. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood often derived inspiration from literature, namely the writings of the Romantic poets and the Arthurian legends. Their artworks frequently incorporated depictions from literary masterpieces, imbuing their art with a profound narrative and dimension. In addition, the Pre-Raphaelites drew inspiration from a diverse array of artistic and literary influences, encompassing mediaeval and Renaissance art, literature, and poetry. They held the belief that combining these diverse forms of artistic expression might result in a more genuine and emotionally evocative form of art. By 1856, the *ut pictura poesis* comparison, along with its related traditions, had significantly declined in strength and vitality. Nevertheless, John Ruskin revived them with the purpose of developing his own idea of the connection between the arts. In volume three of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin classified painting and poetry as distinct yet related types of imaginative representation. He argued that a work that had been undertaken to defend the value of painting should have referred to the principle of *ut pictura poesis*, for throughout the Renaissance and eighteenth century, poetry and painting had been juxtaposed as a means of defending the prestige of visual art (Landow, 1971: 43). Painting and speaking are both modalities of communication. Ruskin established a comparison between poetry and painting, mostly driven by his desire to promote the broader acknowledgment of the latter.

## 2. LITERARY AND SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The poem probably derived inspiration from the legend of Elaine of Astolat, alternatively referred to as Elayne of Ascolat. It is crucial to distinguish her from Elaine of Corbenic, who is Galahad's biological mother, conceived during a relationship with Lancelot. The narrative of Elaine of Astolat is included in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485) as well as in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *The Idylls of the King*, published in the mid-nineteenth century. Additionally, Tennyson's poem, "The Lady of Shalott," also features Elaine's story. The central focus of "The Lady of Shalott" revolves around a youthful woman who is confined in a tower situated on an island in close proximity to the realm of Camelot. Consequently, her perception of the external world is limited to the reflection in a mirror. She is driven to intricately construct a web for countless hours and is afflicted with the incapacity to directly gaze upon the world. The poetic ballad is structured into four separate sections, where each stanza introduces a focal image. The initial segment presents details regarding the backdrop, while the subsequent segment acquaints the reader with the lady, her profession, and her present state. The third

section reaches its culmination when the lady has an encounter with Sir Lancelot. The poem ends with the people of Camelot, including Sir Lancelot, finding the lady's lifeless body. The fourth and final section explores the consequences of the lady's curse and recounts her voyage aboard a boat bound for Camelot.

The Pre-Raphaelites, influenced by medievalism, were modern artists who drew inspiration from the mediaeval era. They created intricate tapestries featuring women and knights embarking on quests, expressing a sense of timelessness and enigma. The Lady of Shalott and Romantic ideals influenced their art, which embraced the shifting attitudes and values of the time by putting an emphasis on individual self-expression and authenticity. This modern perspective highlights the significance of medievalism in contemporary art. According to Pearce, "the Lady of Shalott is a character who suffers from what Althusser called 'the imaginary distortion of the ideological representation of the real world'. This distortion has a precise narratorial manifestation in 'the mirrored images' she weaves in her tapestry, reflecting her interpellation of the ideological state apparatus and the romantic love" (1991: 74). In the poem, the Lady of Shalott lives in isolation, weaving a tapestry and observing the world only through a mirror. Her existence is largely cut off from direct participation in society. The poem does not explicitly mention formal ideological state apparatuses, but it can be inferred that the lady's worldview is shaped by the broader ideological state apparatuses of her society, including the family and perhaps the church. These ideological state apparatuses would have reinforced the separate spheres ideology of her time, which prescribed that women should remain in the domestic and private spheres. When the Lady becomes enamoured with Sir Lancelot and decides to leave her tower to pursue her desires, it can be seen as a challenge to the ideological state apparatuses that have shaped her habitus and the separate spheres of ideology that restrict her. Her actions disrupt the prescribed gender roles and societal norms reinforced by the ideological state apparatuses. The tragic consequences of the lady's defiance in the poem, ultimately leading to her death, highlight the punitive measures that can be taken by society in response to those who challenge the established order. This can be seen as a warning against defying the dominant ideological state apparatuses and ideologies, which were deeply entrenched in Victorian society.

The poem recreates the Victorian idea of separate spheres in a mediaeval setting. The lady's habits and daily routines are shaped by her isolated existence. Conversely, Sir Lancelot is depicted armed and mounted on horseback as a representation of masculinity (Barringer, 1998: 142). The woman has assimilated the cultural standards and anticipated behaviours of her

community, which dictate that women should maintain their purity and seclusion inside the confines of the household. Her behaviour, shaped by her belief in distinct gender roles, drives her to live a life of isolation and participate in a calm, reflective way of living. Throughout the poem, the lady's lifestyle and personal characteristics are put to the test as she develops a strong attraction to Sir Lancelot and makes the decision to abandon her confinement in the tower in order to pursue her longings. This act of rebellion against her prescribed societal function as a passive observer and creator of the "shadows" on her tapestry can be interpreted as a deviation from the idea of separate realms. She challenges and subverts the established gender norms and societal expectations of her era. The repercussions of the lady's departure from her isolated existence are calamitous, as she perishes during her voyage along the river to Camelot. Her demise might be interpreted as a critique of the perils and difficulties encountered by women who had the audacity to venture beyond the limitations imposed by several realms of ideology. It emphasises the penalties enforced on individuals who violate societal norms.

As mentioned before, the Pre-Raphaelites regarded Tennyson's poem as a paradigmatic example. This group was a community of artists that resisted the Royal Academy's support of Raphael. The main members of the group were Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais, and William Holman Hunt; all these artists would later influence John William Waterhouse. The majority of pre-Raphaelite artworks focused on presenting the female figure, highlighting the contrast between the innocent and morally upright woman and the sexually promiscuous *femme fatale*. These contrasted portrayals illustrate the importance of women's struggle for equality. The narrative emphasises two elements that can captivate the fellowship's curiosity: the enigma surrounding the lady confined in the tower and her sorrowful demise as the boat meandered without purpose on the river. Waterhouse's *I Am Half-Sick of Shadows* depicts two scenes from Tennyson's poem, even though they are not presented in chronological order with the events of the narrative. The artwork is inspired by the latter section of the poem (see Figure 1).

But in her web she 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 lovers lately wed;  
'I am half-sick of shadows' said  
The Lady of Shalott  
(Tennyson, 1974: 10).



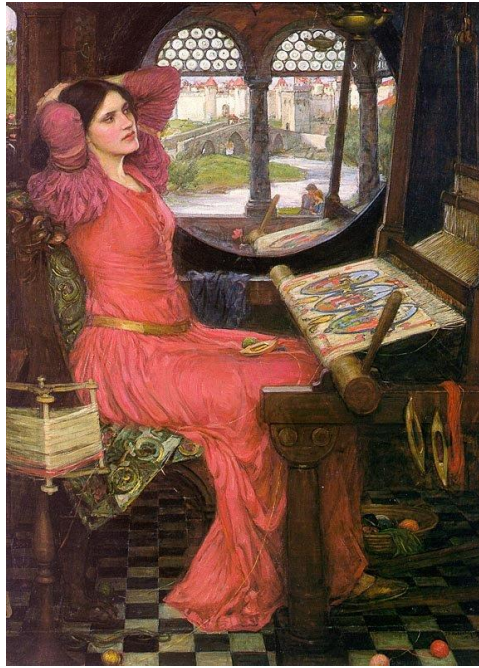


Figure 1. John William Waterhouse: *The Lady of Shalott* (1894),  
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Waterhouse's painting *I Am Half-Sick of Shadows* cleverly integrates two pivotal incidents from Tennyson's poem. Initially, it depicts the instance when the Lady of Shalott ceases her weaving and directs her attention to Sir Lancelot, whose reflection she observes in her glass. Furthermore, it depicts the pivotal moment in the poem where the lady abandons her loom, gazes through the window, and sets off on a voyage downstream towards her fateful outcome. Waterhouse's amalgamation of these events into a singular composition results in a visual synthesis that effectively captures the fundamental nature and emotional fervour of both instances. Waterhouse's painting prioritises the emotional and symbolic content of the poem over a strict adherence to a chronological sequence. The narrative highlights the woman's internal conflict, yearning, and final choice to abandon her secluded life in order to explore the external world beyond her tower. This strategy allows the viewer to form a deep connection with the lady's inner turmoil and her need for human connection and freedom. The painting combines symbolic motifs that augment the intricacy of the narrative. The unfinished tapestry and the disarrayed flowers on the floor represent the lady's artistic autonomy and her liberation from the constraints of her previous existence. The mirror, which reflects both Lancelot and her own image, highlights the contradiction between reality and the manufactured world within the tower. Likewise, the mirror serves as a key symbol in both the poem and the picture. The mirror in the poem functions as the lady's only means of connecting with the outside world from her tower. In contrast, the artwork depicts both Lancelot and the woman herself. The mirror

symbolises the demarcation between her secluded existence and the external universe she yearns to be a part of. The shattered surface of the mirror represents the split nature of her reality, in which she can only perceive life indirectly. The Lady of Shalott is captivated and drawn to Lancelot's appearance. Outside the tower window, the figure symbolises the lady's desire to explore the realms of adventure, love, and freedom. The presence of Lancelot's horse, in a poised and prepared state, contributes a dynamic and expectant quality to the overall composition. The picture as a whole demonstrates how visual art may surpass the linear narrative framework and, within a single frame, depict the various dimensions of a story. Waterhouse accomplishes this by meticulously choosing and seamlessly integrating separate narrative elements, allowing viewers to connect with the emotional and philosophical complexity of the story.

### **3. EKPHRASTIC AND INTERTEXTUAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN VICTORIAN POETRY AND PRE-RAPHAELITE PAINTING**

The reverse ekphrasis approach involves transforming Tennyson's original text into Waterhouse's final artwork, focusing on a particular time depicted in the poem "The Lady of Shalott" through the lady's dialogue. Here, she understands the insufficiency of the world reflected in the mirror and desires to venture into the actual world beyond the limitations of her tower. The statement "I am half-sick of shadows" (Tennyson, 1974: 20) signifies a pivotal moment in the poem, prompting the speaker subsequently to venture into the tangible realm upon discovering the existence of Sir Lancelot. Waterhouse, as other painters, took notice of this expression of discontent. The portrayal of the restricted lady functions as a metaphor for women's limited freedom in this period. The tower is surrounded by four grey walls, which are commonly seen as a symbol of the patriarchal culture prevalent in that era. Alternatively, they may symbolise the Victorian ideology of feminine chastity and naivety, which was a societal expectation for women. This confinement also signifies a woman's segregation from society and underscores the societal demand for her to maintain a state of passivity, seclusion, and sexual purity. There is a potential for making connections between the poem and Plato's Allegory of the Cave. The act of looking into the mirror rather than staring out of the window represents the supremacy of men and the absence of liberty for women. In line with Plato's allegory, the mirror symbolises the constraints imposed on the lady, akin to the shackles worn by captives, which restrict her vision to a single direction. This persists until she chooses to act

and declares, “I am half sick of shadows” (Tennyson, 1974: 10). The prisoner, who is restricted to a cave, recognises the constraints of her environment and yearns to venture into the world outside the cave’s boundaries. Pérez-Gil references Jan Marsh’s analysis of the Lady’s confinement depicted in the artworks of Waterhouse and Holman. Marsh argues that the Lady’s chamber, which bears a resemblance to a jail cell, and the interwoven threads that connect her different identities in John William Waterhouse’s and William Holman Hunt’s renowned illustrations, represent the “limited and confined world of Victorian women” (Pérez-Gil, 2015: 152).

The image provides a dual perspective, depicting both the activity inside the tower and the events outside. Located in the bottom right corner of the mirror is a depiction of “the young lovers,” whom she observes with a mixture of jealousy and contempt. The mirror functions as her sole method of perceiving the surrounding environment; nonetheless, it merely mirrors her own subjective perception. Due to the absence of a physical description of the lady, each painter has portrayed her distinctively in the painting. Waterhouse’s picture showcases three primary components: the female figure, the loom upon which she is engaged in weaving, and a reflective surface. The woman’s stance not only reflects her physical weariness but also her psychological ennui. The snug fit of her crimson attire enhances the contours of her chest, abdomen, and hips, while her elevated arms are presented for the observer’s scrutiny. Concurrently, the reddened aspect of her cheeks suggests a condition of heightened physical or psychological stimulation (Dennis Hoff, 2015: 230). She is trapped in an unending circle that continues without stopping, leaving no space for alternate acts. The painting incorporates diverse visual elements that redefine space and time in an enduring manner while also evoking a palpable sense of tension in the viewer. This is achieved through Waterhouse’s depiction of the “real world” beyond the tower and the “shadowed world,” where the lady is ensnared by a tempest. Despite the absence of representation in the picture, the lady’s gaze is directed towards the wall where the mirror is suspended. The mirror, which determines the destiny of the lady, can be seen as more than just a physical item. It symbolises a recurring theme marked by visual recurrence, leading to different literal or metaphorical interpretations (Lara-Rallo, 2004: 6).

Furthermore, the mirror symbolises the conflict between tangible reality and the obscured realm of darkness. Elizabeth Nelson (1979: 4) asserts that artists employ several elements, such as the poem’s imagery, previous interpretations, related themes, contemporary literary analyses, and personal preferences, to create their own distinctive version of the poem. Waterhouse’s objective in his painting is to portray Tennyson’s poem. Thus, as the viewer

contemplates the image, it elicits Tennyson's emotions in their psyche. The picture beautifully communicates the narrative and atmosphere of the poem. The woman's position exhibits her indifferent and dissatisfied demeanour towards her present circumstances, indicating her desire for transformation. Moreover, the central element of the artwork is the woman's attire, which prominently contrasts with the surrounding colours and significantly enhances the overall impression. The observer's primary attention is directed towards the lady and her vibrant red clothing, while her surroundings are given less careful examination. Both the text and the painting prominently include the mirror as a symbol. The mirror functions as the sole conduit via which the lady in the poem can perceive the external world beyond her tower. The picture depicts the reflection of both Lancelot and the Lady in the mirror. It symbolises the divide between her secluded existence and the external universe she longs to join. The broken surface of the mirror represents the dichotomy of her reality, in which she can only perceive life indirectly. The yarns strewn over the floor possess symbolic meaning. These symbols could perhaps depict the lady's weaving being interrupted or the tapestry being abandoned, indicating her increasing discontent with her restricted existence. The partially finished tapestry on the wall serves as another prominent symbol. It symbolises the woman's artistic production and her submission to her curse. The incompleteness of the task suggests her increasing irritation with her constrained existence and her longing to interact with the tangible world, even if it necessitates defying the curse. Waterhouse can be regarded as a "contemporary pre-Raphaelite" (as posited by Elizabeth Prettejohn), as he was significantly influenced by the movement. He incorporated the defining traits of the Pre-Raphaelites, such as rigorous attention to detail, brilliant colours, and precise depiction of nature, into his own artistic creations. The abundant and intricate flora visible through the tower window, as well as the complex patterns in the tapestry, exemplifies the Pre-Raphaelite movement's dedication to a vibrant and meticulous visual expression. The Pre-Raphaelites held a deep appreciation for both ancient literature and writing, recognising their inherent beauty and ability to evoke strong emotions (Lloyd Webber, 2003: 126). Thus, in accordance with Trippi's (2008: 95) suggestion, Waterhouse, as a modern Pre-Raphaelite, made a deliberate creative decision to select a subject that was favoured by the movement. However, he deviated from their careful and distinctive technique, possibly without being fully aware of it. Instead, he developed a highly individualised method of artistic expression that controversially drew inspiration from modern French art (Upstone qtd. in Prettejohn, 2008: 37).

Waterhouse's *I Am Half Sick of Shadows* is taken from the fourth part of the poem entitled "The Lady of Shalott" (see fig. 2):

And down the river's dim expanse  
Like some bold seer in a trance,  
Seeing all his own mischance  
With glassy countenance  
    Did she look to Camelot.  
And at the closing of the day  
She loosed the chain, and down she lay;  
The broad stream bore her far away,  
    The Lady of Shalott  
(Tennyson, 1974: 20)



Figure 2. John Williams Waterhouse: *I Am Half-Sick of Shadows, Said the Lady of Shalott* (1888), Tate Britain, London.

Despite the tower offering a certain level of protection from the external environment, the lady is keenly conscious of a curse that has been placed upon her, and she fears that her destiny may be predetermined. Sir Lancelot's arrival marks a pivotal moment for the Lady of Shalott, exposing her to potential peril. Afterwards, the Lady sets off on a voyage downstream aboard a boat, leaving a mark by engraving "the Lady of Shalott" on the front of the boat as she travels towards her ultimate downfall in Camelot. Prior to her demise, the woman voices a lucid melody that bears resemblance to a plea or a lamentation. Subsequently, her deceased corpse is found on the shores of Camelot. To properly comprehend the profound significance of this artwork by Waterhouse, it is imperative to meticulously analyse the symbolism employed. The artist skilfully establishes a gloomy and sorrowful atmosphere in order to communicate the

profound theme of the lady's imminent death, transforming each detail into a devastating metaphor.

The buoyant foliage adorning the aqueous expanse bears significant connotations and importance within the arrangement. They function as a potent emblem of deterioration and the relinquishment of purity. The leaves, previously full of life and growing from a tree, now float motionlessly on the water, symbolising the lady's fading vitality and innocence as she faces the ultimate act of sacrifice for love. Located at the highest point of the boat, a crucifix commands attention and serves as a potent symbol with profound Christian connotations. The crucifix symbolises the ultimate act of self-sacrifice that the main character is about to undertake. She possesses a deep understanding of the unreciprocated nature of her affection for Sir Lancelot, and her readiness to offer herself is shown through this significant Christian metaphor. It represents her dedication to pursue a course of selflessness and atonement. The crucifix is accompanied by three candles, which are a ubiquitous feature in Christian religious symbolism. These candles symbolise the divine illumination on altars. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that two of these candles have been snuffed out, creating a sense of ominousness in the surroundings. The consumed candles serve as a sign of the lady's imminent demise, highlighting the seriousness of her sacrifice. Her life appears to be gradually diminishing, and the flickering candles represent the diminishing possibility of reciprocated love. The coexistence of the crucifix and the extinguished lights implies a significant gesture of personal atonement. The woman commits her existence to God indefinitely, in search of absolution for her unreciprocated affection and the upheaval it has brought upon her. She experiences a deeply emotional moment of giving up control when she finds comfort and meaning in her act of selflessness. To summarise, Waterhouse's adept use of symbolism in this picture immerses the observer in a realm of profound sentiments and spiritual significance. The artist skilfully depicts the lady's path towards personal atonement and selflessness by including elements such as the drifting leaves, the crucifix, and the extinguished candles. In addition, he depicts her unavoidable transition into unfamiliar territory, ultimately presenting us with a poignant and intellectually stimulating depiction of human sentiments and beliefs.

Waterhouse's inclusion of several aspects not explicitly stated in the poem results in a precise and faithful depiction of the narrative. For example, the woman transports the tapestry she was creating while she was restricted. The tapestry exhibits many figures reflected by the mirror, including a mounted knight, potentially alluding to Sir Lancelot. Waterhouse offers impartial insights into the lady's historical background and her current condition. Her

melancholic countenance reflects her acceptance of the meaninglessness of life. Conversely, alternative artists depict her with a bewildered expression, deliberately averting their gaze from the viewer. In contrast, Waterhouse deliberately directs the lady's glassy and almost accusing expression directly onto the observer. Released from the mirror, she may now gaze directly into the world. The observer is deeply affected by this glance, as it not only provides insight into her mental condition but also involves us in her demise (Dennis Hoff, 2015: 238–239). Both the poem and the picture portray the lady as determined yet deeply sorrowful. The poem implies that her melancholy stems from her awareness of her impending demise as a consequence of a curse. The painting effectively conveys this intricate emotional condition through the lady's facial expression and physical gestures. Her unwavering stare directed towards Camelot, in a state of almost hypnotic focus, represents her intense desire for a life that transcends the limitations imposed by her curse. Meanwhile, her sorrow serves as a poignant reminder of the inescapable nature of her unhappy fate. The incorporation of emotional depth in the narrative enhances its complexity and elicits empathy from the viewer. The painting's depiction intensifies the meaning of the crucifix, showing the woman as a willing sacrifice who seeks salvation for her transgressions. Waterhouse skilfully combines words and images throughout the artwork. According to Stefan Voeten, the picture demonstrates

a form of transmedial exchange, because both the story and the atmosphere of the poem are transferred onto the painting. The poem describes the river as dim and dark. It is set at the closing of the day. The lady is looking at Camelot almost as if she was in trance, seeing all her mischance. In the painting it can be seen that exact thing. The lady is depicted resolute, quite powerful still, but at the same time, she looks very sad. We know from the poem that this is because she is sailing to her death. (2016: n.p)

According to Mitchell's assertion, the terms "picture" and "image" can be used interchangeably to refer to visual representations on flat surfaces (2018: 231). Therefore, Mitchell's emphasis on the pictorial turn and transmedia narrative revolves around the notion that visual storytelling and the utilisation of pictures play a crucial role in transmedia tales. The incorporation of diverse media, each possessing its own distinct visual element, is crucial in constructing a cohesive and captivating transmedia narrative encounter. The transmedial interaction preserves a consistent narrative flow. The painting functions as a visual expansion of the poetry, offering viewers a supplementary encounter. It enables individuals who are acquainted with the poetry to review and reevaluate its topics and feelings within a fresh creative

framework. Moreover, it offers individuals who are not acquainted with the poem a chance to interact with its narrative components by means of visual storytelling. Transmedial exchange denotes the process of transferring content, concepts, or emotions from one artistic medium to another. The painting is directly inspired by Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem "The Lady of Shalott". This contact facilitates a dynamic exchange between literature and visual art, allowing the painting to visibly express the fundamental elements of the poem's narrative and atmosphere. The artwork functions as both a representation of the poem and a means of deepening the viewer's comprehension of the narrative and emotions depicted in the literary piece.

The poem depicts the river as "dark" and "sombre" and establishes the setting at the "end of the day". The details create a unique and palpable atmosphere in the poem. The picture aptly captures this atmosphere through its visual depiction. The muted colours, the fading light, and the calm yet mournful expression of the lady all work together to recreate the atmosphere portrayed in the poem. The conveyance of atmosphere is essential for properly conveying the mood and tone of the tale. This fact highlights the interconnectedness and mutual influence of several art forms, showcasing how they can come together to create a more profound and engaging experience for the viewer. This showcases the power of art to transcend its medium and evoke a similar emotional response or convey a shared narrative, regardless of the various media in which it is presented. The interaction between literature and visual art demonstrates the flexibility and ability to convey ideas that emerge from the combination of artistic forms, making it a captivating and intellectually fascinating aspect of the creative process. In light of what was stated previously regarding the various symbols in both paintings, the subsequent repetition of images and their constellations of meanings have revealed additional patterns:

- The tower represents entrapment of all kinds (sometimes seen as the opposite of freedom of movement), as well as isolation. The tower represents the lady's physical and emotional imprisonment. She resides in a secluded location, dedicating herself to the art of tapestry weaving, completely isolated from the external world. The tower represents both physical imprisonment and emotional solitude. It demonstrates her incapacity to directly interact with life, love, and society since she is constrained to observe the world solely via her mirror.
- The mirror—the nature of reality and the self. The mirror symbolises the lady's indirect vision of reality. It mirrors the external world for her, although it portrays a fragmented and skewed perspective. This phenomenon reflects the manner in which several



individuals indirectly encounter reality via different filters or media, prompting inquiries regarding the essence of perception and introspection. The mirror also relates to the notions of self-awareness and identity as the lady contemplates her own reflection.

- The weaving, or embroidery, represents creativity and artistic production. The lady's weaving or embroidery serves as both a means of expressing her creativity and as her lifelong occupation. It symbolises her artistic aptitude and her unwavering commitment to her profession. However, it also signifies her passive state of being, in which she observes and interprets the environment rather than actively participating in it. Her decision to cease her weaving symbolises her defiance of the submissive role she was supposed to assume.
- Lancelot: a life-altering desire but also a story of loss and rejection. The sight of Sir Lancelot outside the tower window enchants the woman, arousing thoughts of intrigue and need. He personifies the charm and appeal of a livelier and more fervent existence. Although she managed to escape, his refusal to accept her resulted in deprivation and emotional pain. Lancelot exemplifies the intricate dynamic between longing and its repercussions, demonstrating how the pursuit of one's wishes may result in both gratification and disillusionment.
- The Curse and the Boat: Fate or Doom and the Nature of Death (Howey, 2020: 184). The curse inflicted upon the lady is a significant aspect of the storyline. The tower restricts her movements, compelling her to engage in weaving and obstructing her direct view of the external world. The boat, which she employs as a means of eluding, represents her resistance against this curse and her acknowledgment of her destiny. Furthermore, it symbolises her progression towards her unavoidable demise, as she is aware that the curse will inevitably lead to her collapse.

The repeating symbolism and the developing patterns of interpretation in Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem "The Lady of Shalott" mirror the complex structure of the story and the depth of its ideas. The poem's repeating themes highlight the transformation of the lady from a passive observer to an active participant in her own life. The protagonist's decision to leave the tower, free herself from the curse, and go on the river symbolises her rebellion against confinement and her pursuit of an authentic existence, regardless of the eventual unfavourable consequences it entails. The recurrent imagery in the poem aptly conveys the themes of solitude, longing, artistic expression, destiny, and personal exploration, rendering it a profound and enduring literary work.

#### **4. THE PROCESS OF CIRCULAR INTERTEXTUALITY THROUGH A FILMIC REPRESENTATION OF TENNYSON'S POEM**

A brief film adaptation was produced in 2009 to commemorate the bicentenary of Tennyson's birth. The adaptation is derived from his poem and was helmed by Nicole Loven, who adopted an approach of cyclical intertextuality. Tennyson is depicted in the first scene of the meeting, where he performs a recitation of "The Lady of Shalott". While reciting, the words of the poem undergo a metamorphosis and materialise as a visual representation. According to Lara-Rallo, this approach suggests that limiting intertextuality to only textual works demonstrates a fresh interest in the creative possibilities of aesthetic cross-pollination (2004: 10). In order to support this assertion, the poetry undergoes a conversion into a visual representation and, later, into another visual representation through the process of cinema adaptation. The dramatic performance exhibits a striking similarity to Waterhouse's paintings, faithfully reproducing the essence of the text. Waterhouse's artwork is distinguished by its painstaking precision, brilliant colour palette, prominent emphasis on storytelling, and profound emotional expression. If the dramatic performance closely resembles Waterhouse's paintings, it indicates a true dedication to the pre-Raphaelite aesthetic. This alignment guarantees that the visual representation remains faithful to both the essence of Tennyson's poem and the artistic style of the Pre-Raphaelites. The visual depiction of Tennyson's poem aims to encapsulate the fundamental elements of the story, sentiments, and motifs through the use of imagery. The illustrations may portray several aspects of the poem, such as the woman engaged in weaving in her tower, her illicit glance at Sir Lancelot, or her disastrous voyage downstream. This initial analysis offers a graphical depiction of the words used in the poem. Visual depictions frequently depend on symbolism to communicate intricate concepts and sentiments. Circular intertextuality permits the utilisation of symbols that are directly taken from the imagery and symbolism of the poetry. For instance, the mirror, tapestry, river, and flowers depicted in "The Lady of Shalott" can be included in the artwork to enhance its significance, strengthening the correlation between the two artistic forms. The process of initially converting the poem into a visual product is an intriguing and imaginative undertaking. The poem "The Lady of Shalott" by Alfred Lord Tennyson extensively utilises vibrant and suggestive depictions to communicate its storyline and atmosphere. When a picture is created, whether through painting or other visual techniques, it needs to condense these descriptions into a single, unchanging frame. This process entails the meticulous curation of crucial components, including the lady, her boat, Camelot, and the river, to construct a visually captivating arrangement that encapsulates the fundamental nature of the

poem. The actress Victoria Rigby has a striking resemblance to Tennyson's heroine in various ways. Rigby personally delivers the dialogue, which includes quotes such as "I am half-sick of shadows" (fig. 3) and "The curse is upon me" (fig. 4).



Figure 3. "I am half-sick of shadows," *The Lady of Shalott*, dir. Nicole Loven, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7\\_djmlH\\_GMs&t=57s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_djmlH_GMs&t=57s), 4'52", @CrowsEyeProductions (<https://www.crowseye.co.uk/>)



Figure 4. "The curse is upon me," *The Lady of Shalott*, dir. Nicole Loven, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7\\_djmlH\\_GMs&t=57s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_djmlH_GMs&t=57s), 6'53", @CrowsEyeProductions (<https://www.crowseye.co.uk/>)

Transforming the imagery derived from the poem and translating it into a cinematic form is an inherent evolution within the artistic endeavour. The video enables dynamic storytelling with a sequence of mobile visuals, auditory elements, and spoken exchanges. It possesses the capacity to enhance the storyline by exploring character motivations, emotions, and relationships in a more profound manner. While the original image portrays a singular moment, the cinematic adaptation can offer a more expansive framework, enhancing the viewer's comprehension of the poem's motifs and characters. This truth enhances the genuineness and richness of the poem. On the *LizzieSiddal.com* website, Stephanie Chatfield quotes a member of the production team:

As part of our filmed dramatization of the lady of Shalott we are also recording an actor as Tennyson reading his poem to an after-dinner audience. It is a fictional event, so for fun we thought we would include some of the artists who illustrated his work including Holman Hunt and Rossetti, so I couldn't resist including Lizzie Siddal in the audience. Most of the audience will be in formal dress for 1856, but the artists rather more bohemian. (2009: n.p)

Integrating these components into the film dramatization not only enhances the action with greater intricacy and profundity, but also provides a light-hearted yet perceptive examination of the interrelationships among literature, art, and history. It enables spectators to fully engage with the world of the Pre-Raphaelites and Tennyson, blurring the boundaries between fantasy and reality in a creatively captivating way. The primary objective of this conversion, spanning from poem to image to cinema, is to aptly communicate the fundamental nature of the poem. The objective is to elicit identical feelings, themes, and narrative components that contribute to the captivating nature of "The Lady of Shalott" as a literary masterpiece. The adaptation of the paintings of Waterhouse in the Pre-Raphaelite tradition is influenced by the importance of detail, emotion, and narrative coherence (fig. 5). The process of converting Tennyson's poetry into an image and then into a film is a creative expedition that encompasses condensation, analysis, and augmentation. The similarity to John William Waterhouse's artworks indicates a strong adherence to the Pre-Raphaelite style and a sincere effort to visually depict the core of the poetry. This adaptation aims to revitalise a timeless literary masterpiece by providing audiences with a new viewpoint, while staying true to the poem's fundamental themes and emotions.



Fig. 5. "She loosed the chain, and down she lay; the broad stream bore her far away," *The Lady of Shalott*, dir. Nicole Loven, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7\\_djmlH\\_GMs&t=57s,7'52](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_djmlH_GMs&t=57s,7'52)", @CrowsEyeProductions (<https://www.crowseye.co.uk/>)

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Waterhouse's intertextual dialogue with Tennyson's poem involves a reverse process of ekphrasis. The interaction between image and word is transformed into a different visual expression. This is then repeated in a film version. This essay analyses the interaction between poetry and painting, which contradicts da Vinci's paragon of the arts. These two disciplines are different, and they cannot be analysed in the same way. Waterhouse's "The Lady of Shalott" is an example of the interplay between the word and the image, as seen in Tennyson's written work and in Loven's fictionalised adaptation.

Traditionally, ekphrasis refers to a piece of art that draws inspiration from a piece of literature. In this case, however, it is the visual arts (Waterhouse's paintings) that provide the inspiration for a reimagining of the literary work. This reversal is significant because it demonstrates the malleability of artistic inspiration and how different media can feed into and inform each other. As discussed, the interaction between Tennyson's words and Waterhouse's paintings results in a distinct visual expression. This transformation highlights the ability of art to reinterpret and reimagine existing works. While drawing inspiration from the poem, Waterhouse's paintings develop into their own distinctive artistic expression. They add layers of meaning and interpretation that go beyond the original text. Waterhouse's painting, *I Am Half-Sick of Shadows*, portrays the climax of the poem. In the painting, the lady leaves her loom, looks out of the window, and begins a journey downstream. It merges these events to convey the essence and emotional intensity of both moments. The painting prioritises the emotional and symbolic content of the poem over a strict chronological sequence. Likewise, symbolic elements are incorporated into the painting to enhance the intricacy of the narrative.

Each adaptation brings its own nuances and interpretations, showing how a single narrative can take on new dimensions when presented through different artistic lenses. Furthermore, poetry and painting are different disciplines. They cannot be analysed in the same way. This observation is crucial in recognising the different characteristics and languages of each medium. While both can convey emotion and narrative, they do so through different sensory and aesthetic experiences. Waterhouse's painting visually represents Tennyson's words, enhancing the audience's understanding of the poem in a different way than words alone. Loven's fictionalised adaptation extends the conversation about reinterpretation and intertextuality. This adaptation demonstrates how the interaction between words and images can evolve and inspire new creative works over time, highlighting the lasting impact of Tennyson's poem and Waterhouse's painting.

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