



Tweeting Tennyson

Teaching British Literature survey classes (or literature in general) at the community college level can be challenging. Because students are dealing with content produced during a bygone era, as well as from a different country and social structure, moving beyond simple plot discussions to a genuine analysis of the themes of the work can seem like an insurmountable task. Moreover, explaining the vocabulary used can take up more time than does a careful reading of the literature, and many students question why they're reading such poems, stories, and plays when everyday life has clearly changed so much. After pondering these questions, I have integrated discussions of contemporary technology with analysis of older poetic works to impress upon students the relevance of the themes contained in historical British literature.

A useful entrée into the Victorian period can be the works of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, particularly some of his shorter narrative poems dealing with the theme of isolation. After learning about the author's background and some historical context regarding industrialization in the Victorian period, my classes discuss Tennyson's two poems, "Mariana" and "The Lady of Shalott." Audio performances of these pieces provide students with a sense of the cadence and rhythm of the works, it helps those who did the reading at home refresh their memories and perhaps hear something they did not notice before, and if anyone skipped the reading altogether, they are provided with at least rudimentary knowledge of the pieces.¹ I ask all students to listen to the audio while following along and annotating their texts to ensure a current reading of the works is in their minds as we begin our analysis.

After listening to the audio versions of Tennyson's two poems, I ask students to freewrite (an exercise where students write down whatever comes to mind about a topic for a set amount of time without editing themselves) on the isolation of either poem's main character, focusing on what is causing her disconnect from the rest of the world, her feelings on the subject, and what action, if any, she chooses to take. This step is invaluable, as it allows each student time to look back over the two works, choose the one they prefer, and gather some thoughts prior to the class discussion.

I start the class discussion by asking why and how each character finds herself isolated, and how she feels about her withdrawal or separation from society. The differences are rather obvious—one is isolated by choice, and one is the victim of a cruel curse that only allows

her to view the world through reflections she sees in a mirror. This second subject cannot even turn to look out the window, and yet she must spin what she sees reflected in front of her into art, weaving scenes that she views only indirectly and in which she can never participate.

This progression through the poems has been fairly standard practice every time I have taught the course, but this semester I asked the students if they could draw any parallels between the women in Tennyson's poems and our current use of and reliance on social media. The conversation became alive immediately and did not require much prompting on my part. Students spoke about how apps such as Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat have become our windows through which we see a reflected world and how the pictures we scroll through are distorted, much like those in the Lady of Shalott's mirror, because everything she sees is backward. Like what we see on social media, what the woman weaves from reflections might approach reality but never provides an accurate picture of the real world because she is never seeing the world firsthand. The experience is also never satisfying, as the woman says she becomes "half sick of shadows" and must eventually experience something genuine, even at the expense of her own life (Tennyson 71). Students immediately recognized the anxiety created by observing a distorted view of the world and never participating in it directly. They also noted that the Lady of Shalott is finally willing to die in order to have some connection, even post-mortem, with the society around her (a society that knows she is there, since they hear her singing, but one that never tries to invite her in).

Although somewhat of a stretch, a few students noted that Mariana is willing to allow her "grange," or country home, to fall down around her as she waits for Angelo, the lover who jilted her, to return. They drew comparisons to people who "lurk" on social media but never participate, or those who only engage in relationships online and keep to themselves in real life. This, they noted, can lead to depression and feelings of being unloved or unwanted, much like Mariana notes at the end of every stanza when she complains of being "weary" and wishing over and over that she were dead.

Students who had never spoken in class before contributed to this conversation, in part because of the safety of it. Many students feel hesitant speaking up about literature

¹Multiple audio versions of the two poems mentioned above are available on YouTube. I particularly enjoy the sung version of "The Lady of Shalott" performed by Loreena McKennitt because it gives students a clear example of how metrically regular the work is.

because they worry about having the “wrong” read on it or worry that they could potentially “say something stupid.” However, when we turn to the discussion of technology and social media, students are the experts. They mentioned social media that I had never heard of and explained the parallels that exist between the isolated women in the poems and the virtual world in which some of these students have been immersed since they were children. There was even some laughter as someone argued that all Mariana needed was a Tinder account and she’d be thrilled to leave her moated grange! They were happy to explain this electronic world to me, and instead of me coming up with leading questions, they were very willing to note how their points corresponded to the poems we were reading.

It was a raucous class discussion, but the closing thoughtfully returned to the Victorian era, helping the class to focus on a Victorian concern with the commoditization of workers increasingly viewed as cogs in a much larger machine. In addition to providing some very interesting analysis of Tennyson’s themes, this assignment allowed and encouraged students to sincerely think about the ways in which we are being isolated by the very technology that purports to connect us, much like many Victorians became disillusioned with their role in industrialization. Some students even wondered if they would be willing to free themselves, metaphorically speaking, and give up electronic connections even for a weekend to find an authentic human one. Finally, we discussed the impact of how and when we reach out to others, online or in person, simply as human beings. No one reaches out to the Lady, and her lifeless body arrives in their midst: What responsibility does the society of Camelot have to include others in their daily lives? What responsibility, modernly, do we have to do the same? Overall, what might Tennyson have wanted his readers to think about in a world that was becoming increasingly detached from human connection?

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Works Cited

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