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**THE PROBLEM OF SELF-IDENTITY IN TENNYSON'S
THE LADY OF SHALOTT AND BROWNING'S
*MY LAST DUCHESS***

The concept of self-identity is one of the major issues of the postmodern philosophy. According to Derrida's theory, "the self can never be entirely separated from the other"¹, therefore one can never gain complete knowledge of what one is. Similarly, Lacan argued that since the self is determined by language, one's identity is "constantly reconstituted and in constant flux"². The notion of self-identity is thus not given and fixed, but it "has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual"³.

The postmodern idea of the unstable identity perfectly corresponds to the problem of defining one's self in *The Lady of Shalott* and *My Last Duchess*. The main speakers of the poems constantly try to construct their own names, but the task turns out to be very difficult.

The Lady from the Tennyson's poem⁴ appears to the outside world as a person who "imbowers the silent isle" (P I, l. 17). Secluded by "four gray walls, and four gray towers" (P I, l. 15), the Lady becomes a mystery to the people of Camelot. Some of them even doubt whether she exists:

But who hath seen her wave her hand?
Or at the casement seen her stand?

¹ *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. Craig, London – New York 1998, p. 190.

² [Online]. Available at: <http://tranquileye.com/mirrors/panop/topicsself.htm> [May 20, 2009].

³ A. Giddens, *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age*, Stanford 1991, p. 52.

⁴ I quote *The Lady of Shalott* and *My Last Duchess* after *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, New York – London 1986.

Or is she known in all the land,
The Lady of Shalott?

(P I, l. 24-27)

Only the reapers hear the Lady's song, which makes them believe that she truly lives in the tower. Moreover, while listening to the song they imagine the Lady as a "fairy" (P I, l. 35). She may be then perceived in two ways: as a beautiful woman or a magical creature. The reapers' ambiguous conception of the Lady of Shalott foregrounds the problem of how her own identity is constituted. The Lady turns out to be mysterious not only to the people of Camelot, but also to herself. Once locked in the tower, she "weaves by night and day/ A magic web with colours gay" (P II, l.1-2). The Lady knows very little about the reasons why she is secluded. Her knowledge is based only on a "whisper" (P II, l. 3) which once said that "A curse is on her if she stay / To look down to Camelot" (P II, l. 4-5). Therefore, the Lady perceives the exterior world only by reflections and shadows in the magic mirror. She is cut off from the real space and nature. The mysterious curse prevents her from experiencing the real world. On one hand, the metaphor of a mirror emphasizes Lady's seclusion and loneliness, but on the other hand, it becomes an emblem of the artificiality and pointlessness of her existence.

The Lady is constantly preoccupied with the act of weaving her web, but it seems that she is weaving for weaving's sake, since she does not see any sense in it:

And so she weaveth steadily,
And little other care hath she,
The Lady of Shalott.

(P II, l. 7-9)

Her attitude towards this style of life suddenly changes when she sees a loving couple in the mirror. Then the Lady realizes that her existence is dull, and that she wants to experience real life and to explore who she really is. The first step she makes is to articulate the desire to taste the life of a real woman. That is why she says "I am half sick of shadows" (P II, l. 35). This statement reflects not only the wish to quit her passive existence, but it also conveys the desire to be defined, to become fully aware of one's own name. Thanks to Sir Lancelot, who has captured the Lady's attention and made her fall in love with him, she makes an attempt to fulfill her plans. Therefore,

She left the web, she left the loom,
 She made three paces through the room,
 She saw the water-lily bloom,
 She saw the helmet and the plume,
 She look'd down to Camelot.

(P III, l. 30-34)

The Lady is aware of the fact that the decision to act against the “whisper” will cause the curse to come upon her. Nevertheless, she is so determined to participate in the real life and to experience love that she sets out for Camelot in a boat bearing her name:

Down she came and found a boat
 Beneath a willow left afloat,
 And around about the prow she wrote
The Lady of Shalott.

(P IV, l. 6-9)

Since the Lady dies at the end of the journey, some scholars perceive as impossible her attempt to enter language and social identity *via* the sign which is her name. “She becomes in death what she was without knowing it in life: a floating signifier.”⁵ In other words, “the Lady’s body itself becomes a sign in death, but what it means, who it is for, and what the Lady intended it to say remain unknowable”⁶. Therefore, the Lady of Shalott, who lived as a mystery, dies as a mystery both to the people of Camelot and to herself.

Constructing one’s own identity is also one of the themes of *My Last Duchess*. The duke of Ferrara’s dramatic monologue reflects his ambition to be perceived as a powerful man. His domineering attitude towards other people is already expressed in the opening lines of his speech:

That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall,
 Looking as if she were alive. I call
 That piece a wonder, now: (...)
 (...) and there she stands.

(l. 1-4)

⁵ K.A. Psomiades, “*The Lady of Shalott*” and the critical fortunes of Victorian poetry, [in:] *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, eds. F. Lentricchia, T. McLaughlin, Chicago – London 1995, p. 38.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

The duke proudly presents a portrait of his dead wife. His words reveal the desire to have control over the people who surround him. Unable to control the duchess when she was alive, the duke now triumphantly demonstrates his power over her portrait: “none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I” (l. 9-10). He evokes the image of a powerful master also by mentioning the hard work of the artist who produced the painting for him: “Frà Pandolf’s hands / Worked busily a day” (l. 4). The duke of Ferrara constructs his name also by referring to pathos. Therefore, he creates an emotional picture of a loving, but abused husband:

(...) Sir, ‘twas not
Her husband’s presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess’ cheek (...).

(l. 13-15)

Who had no choice but to murder his disrespectful wife:

Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene’er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave
commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. (...)

(l. 41-44)

The Duke wanted to rule the Duchess in every possible way. His possessive attitude was reflected mainly in the demand that her joy was directed only toward him. Even after her death, he kept the painting hidden behind a curtain so that he had the Duchess’s smile only for himself. The Duchess can be thus perceived as an extremely tragic figure. Her fate seems to be very similar to that of the Lady of Shalott. Both women lived in seclusion – the Duchess suffocated in the relationship with the jealous Duke, and the Lady was doomed to weave the web pointlessly for the rest of her life. Both women were cut off from the reality they wanted to experience. However, they made attempts to change their passive existence. As Artavia Lineszy-Overton notices, “The Duchess’s smile was a symbol of her connection with the outside of her marriage”⁷. She communicated with others through her smile and joy. The Lady of Shalott, on the other hand, had the magic mirror in which she could see the reflections of the outer, “pageant life”. Unfortunately, both women paid high price for their at-

⁷ A. Lineszy-Overton (2005). *A feminist reading of “My Last Duchess”*, p. 4. [Online]. Available at: ablongman.com [May 20, 2009].

tempts to free themselves from the oppressive surroundings. The Duchess was murdered and the Lady died on her way to Camelot.

Duke of Ferrara's turn to crime resulting from the desire to subject his wife to him, reveals a discrepancy between his initial and final character. Paradoxically, as soon as the duke admits that he had committed a crime, he loses self-confidence. His loss of control is conveyed most noticeably through the enjambment in the last lines of the poem. The run-over lines reflect the duke's uneasiness over his wife's murder, and therefore reveal the other side of his personality. In fact it has been noticed that:

The duke's whole performance, his boasting speech to the envoy, is an expression of a wish for absolute power that has just opposite effect, revealing the duke as someone who is so lacking in confidence about his power that he needs constant reassurance⁸.

The duke's attempt to present himself as a powerful man turns out to be unsuccessful. The painting, which at the first sight functions as a representation of the duke's absolute power, "seems to be a continual reminder of his weakness"⁹.

The two poems expose the desire to be fully defined as an illusive project. The Lady of Shalott tries to signal her existence by setting out for Camelot, but she does not have the chance to explore the mysteries of her life, because she dies unexpectedly. Similarly, the Duchess's friendly personality is never given the opportunity to flourish as it is cruelly suppressed by her possessive husband. The duke of Ferrara's performance, which was supposed to signal his absolute power, paradoxically reveals the frustrations of an unconfident man. Both attempts to constitute one's stable self turn out to be unfortunate. This conclusion perfectly reflects the Derridean idea that self can be also experienced as alienated and therefore one can never completely decode one's own name.

STRESZCZENIE

Derridiańska i Lacanowska idea, iż człowiek nigdy do końca nie jest w stanie siebie poznać i że cały czas kształtuje swoją tożsamość, znajduje odzwierciedlenie w poematach Tennysona i Browninga. Podmioty liryczne w obu tych utworach podejmują próbę określenia swojego „ja”, lecz okazuje się, że zamierzenie to skazane jest na przegraną.

⁸ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Representation*, [in:] *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. cit., p. 20.

⁹ Ibidem.

Tajemnicza Dama z poematu Tennysona, zamknięta w wieży, a tym samym oddzielona od świata zewnętrznego, cierpi z powodu swojej monotonnej egzystencji. Cięży na niej klątwa, która zabrania jej spoglądać przez okno – inaczej bowiem spotka ją nieszczęście. Jej jedynym środkiem kontaktu ze światem zewnętrznym jest lustro, w którego odbiciach obserwuje to, co dzieje się poza zamkiem. Zwierciadło staje się tutaj symbolem zarówno osamotnienia Damy, jak również braku autentyczności i bezcelowości jej egzystencji. Rozpaczliwa próba zmiany dotychczasowego życia kończy się dla niej dramatycznie. Pozostaje po niej tylko imię. Stanowi ono znak jej pragnienia poznania siebie i swojego otoczenia. Jest to jednak znak, który do końca pozostanie owiany tajemnicą.

Z kolei w poemacie Browninga księżę Ferrary prezentuje się jako potężny władca, który pragnie mieć kontrolę szczególnie nad swoją żoną. Ponieważ księżna zbyt często się uśmiecha do innych ludzi, w tym mężczyzn, księżę zleca jej zabójstwo, a następnie namalowanie portretu, który byłby oglądany tylko przez niego. W ten sposób księżę, który nie mógł w pełni panować nad swoją żoną za życia, obejmuje ją całkowitą kontrolą po śmierci. Losy księżnej przypominają więc dzieje Damy z Shalott. Obie kobiety pragnęły wyrwać się z otaczającej je rzeczywistości i wyeksponować swoje prawdziwe „ja”. O ile żona księcia próbowała szukać kontaktu ze światem zewnętrznym, który doceniłby jej wrażliwą naturę, o tyle Dama z Shalott, najpierw za pomocą zwierciadła, a potem już autentycznej obserwacji, próbowała doświadczyć życia poza murami, które dałoby jej spełnienie. Obie próby kończą się jednak niepowodzeniem. Postać księcia również nie jest jednoznaczna, okazuje się bowiem, że pod powłoką surowego i pewnego siebie władcy skrywa się sfrustrowany, zdominowany przez swoje słabości człowiek.

Analiza obu utworów pokazuje, że próba stworzenia stabilnego „ja” nie jest możliwa. Za Derridą należałoby zatem powtórzyć, że tożsamość zawsze zawiera w sobie pierwiastek „obcego”, dlatego nigdy nie potrafimy określić, kim tak naprawdę jesteśmy.

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