



The Lady of Shalott Breaks the Fourth Wall and Goes with the Flow

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Abstract

*Literary canon, a concept where merely the term invokes respect and a sense of something dignified and solid, serves as a stronghold and representative of the time in which it was written. Traditional literary analysis in the scholarly university traditions may for many also serve as precisely a bastion of four grey, towered walls holding its own in a flow of change; a tradition to be upheld and compartmentalized in a time capsule of the mind. This paper shows an example of how contemporary - though not necessarily new - pedagogical approaches may break this mould. This paper is not to be seen as a criticism of traditional literary analysis, but rather as serving the function and purpose of supplementing tradition by demonstrating a possible meeting between canonical literature and more contemporary trends and approaches in working with literature, especially within teacher training. Here the university teacher should be a role model to his or her teacher trainees by accommodating differentiated learning and seeing the connection between not only other school subjects, but also to trigger the existing knowledge and experience of the individual learner beyond the confines of the classroom walls. This meeting between literary canon and pedagogical trends is exemplified by Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem *The Lady of Shalott* [1] as seen through the concepts of breaking the fourth wall [2], flow theory [3], location-based learning, and in-depth learning. Placing *The Lady of Shalott* within the context of the bespoke pedagogical approaches may lay the foundation for a student-centred reader-response approach; a response that is well rooted in the students' world beyond the confines and spells of the traditional university lecture hall. This paper points to how the poem may be seen in light of different approaches, and though the author does not provide ready-made teaching methods, he hopefully signs out with the proverbial door ajar.*

Keywords: *Canonical literature, Fourth Wall, flow theory, location-based learning, in-depth learning*

An island mid-stream sets the stage for a classic piece of Victorian poetry - and the setting for a look across one's shoulder to shed light on a current trending educational approach. This article shows how 19th century poetry may be used working with currently trending educational concepts. Fast forward to the 21st century, the term and concept of in-depth learning has become one of the current pedagogical trends. In-depth learning is not new as such, but as with earlier and other current trends of psychology, pedagogy and learning, already well-established practice and approaches are brought to the attention through researchers collecting and sorting out material, exemplified by Sigmund Freud's theory of the Oedipus Complex [4], and Howard Gardner's theories of the multiple intelligences [5].

In-depth Learning

This article does not discuss the definition of the concept of in-depth learning per se, but is a response to how in-depth learning may be approached in the predominately theoretical classroom of traditional university education, where subjects and topics have a tendency of being compartmentalized. The need to focus on in-depth learning in higher education is legitimized and required in the 2020 subject renewal of the Norwegian National Curriculum [6]. The 2016 white paper defines the concept of in-depth learning:

In-depth learning means that the pupils gradually and over time develop their understanding of concepts and connections within a subject. The pupils' learning outcomes increase as they develop a comprehensive understanding of subjects through in-depth learning and see the



connection between subjects, and how to apply what they have learned to solve problems and tasks in new contexts. [my translation] [7]

Teacher trainer students need to be educated as good role models, and therefore in-depth learning needs to be addressed and rooted in their teacher training program; not merely by reading a textbook or research articles on in-depth learning, but also by the university teaching staff themselves being role models and implementing work with in-depth learning as part of their own teaching. The white paper definition of in-depth learning may be seen as a response, or at least contrast, to traditional subject compartmentalization in higher education, where in-depth learning will ideally require a desired role model in the university teacher. The deeper understanding of a subject or topic is based more on contextualization than on pure factual knowledge of a narrower specified field or area, thus an in-depth learning approach will comprise of a range of activities where it is necessary for the university teacher to not only facilitate for the students to respond positively, but to be an active participant in the process. The facilitation of working with a variety of learning styles and triggering the various intelligences [5] is not just *beneficial* to in-depth learning, but a *necessity*. Through providing carefully selected problem-based tasks, knowledge and competence is contextualized by both promoting and expressing interests, triggering schemata, personal experiences, and learning styles. However, it is also vital that these qualities may be expressed through a product representing and defining the process. The follow-up paper to this one, *Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue* [8], presents a student-centred in-depth learning session.

Development of tools to assist teaching and learning processes see an accelerated development, and common to these tools they are digital in form. This is an interesting aspect, as apart from modes of presentation, the worlds of both teacher and learners are yet arguably predominantly non-digital, where the rapid development of new digital teaching and learning resources should by all intentions benefit the learning process and outcome. On the one hand we have the tools, and on the other what to use them for. The vast opportunities within digital learning such as sourcing, presentation, and virtual travel fit well with two current trends in education: The extended classroom and in-depth learning.

Common to the development and arrival of new tools is that they seek to facilitate and ease the traditional approach to learning, whereas this article goes against the flow, using an old tool (as in a classic poem) to work with current themes and concepts of learning. To acquire in-depth learning, it is arguably necessary to take into use the extended classroom. The first thought and concept that for many springs to mind when the term extended classroom is brought forth, is moving the traditional classroom activities outdoors. This may be seen as outdoor learning, though a truly extended classroom would be taking into use location-based learning through e.g. field work in the tidal zone, the forest, visiting the local fire station, museum, and other institutions, to mention but a few examples.

To categorize aspects of the extended classroom through location-based learning, one may view location-based learning either as local (carrying out fieldwork and visiting institutions locally) or non-local (using a location in a more distant location; for the subject English typically one within an English-speaking country). Local location-based learning may be challenging to legitimize the placement of the subject English, so non-local location-based learning might well be the better approach. Breaking the fourth wall, a concept attributed to the French philosopher, critic, and dramatist Denis Diderot [9], in the context of the extended classroom is to not only communicate *within* the outside world [10], but also communicating *with* the outside world [11]. The approach to in-depth learning through work with Lord Alfred Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott* may be seen as an extended classroom or learning space; not in terms of physical space, but rather one of mind over matter in terms of communicating with one's own experiences and understanding of the world as an internal point of departure. The Lady of Shalott is in this paper used as a representative of canonical literature, a poem from a literary period that teacher students in Norway over the years have found challenging, and some even regard as of little value to their future work as teachers when studied by way traditional literary analysis. Having neither a time machine nor a portal to Tennyson's time and world, communicating with his world is neither possible nor an option by breaking a *physical* fourth wall.

Breaking the fourth wall is still the preferred approach to the poetry session as a main focal point of this article. Breaking the fourth wall is more than opening to and communicating with the real world outside the classroom walls, it is also opening one's mind to seeing compartmentalized subject learning in the context of the real world as seen first-hand through personal experience and sensibility. Thus, the concepts of breaking the fourth wall and non-local location-based learning are used here break with the concrete and readily accepted definitions, moving towards on the one hand the more abstract mindset, memories, and emotions of the student, but still on the other hand a very real part of



the student's world; combining their present world as students with their entire world beyond the classroom walls.

Tapping into one's collective memory and experiences will consciously and sub-consciously release a flow of memories and emotions that may be likened to the concept of stream of consciousness, a term first coined by Alexander Bain [12], and first used in a literary context by novelist May Sinclair [13]. The concept of stream of consciousness is used in different ways by among others Proust and Joyce [14] and the students' first meeting with the concept is often through British author Virginia Woolf and her iconic 1917 short story *The Mark on the Wall* [15]. The unleashed flow of memory and experiences creates involvement that is triggered by intrinsic motivation based on own experiences, rather than the extrinsic motivation generated by a system of reproducing facts for final exams. A high level of intrinsic motivation and ownership to one's world contribute to moving the students and their work into a flow zone as their work is self-driven. This is confirmed by M. Csikszentmihalyi by what he terms the flow theory [3], where the essence is

flow is an optimal psychological state that people experience when engaged in an activity that is both appropriately challenging to one's skill level, often resulting in immersion and concentrated focus on a task. This can result in in-depth learning and high levels of personal and work satisfaction [16]

The continuation of this article will take a peek into how one may see the confluence of the stream of consciousness and the crossing of mental barriers and compartmentalizing in the university classroom as a contribution to in-depth learning.

Lord Alfred Tennyson's 1832 poem *The Lady of Shalott* may arguably be regarded as one of his finest poems; a vivid description of medieval chivalry laced with symbolism inspiring especially Pre-Raphaelite painters and serving well as a sample for work with symbolism in many a language and literature classroom. In the pre-Internet days, the teacher would lecture on the poet, the times, and the language and symbolism of the poem; the attentive student would take notes and reproduce for the coming exams. These were times when the teacher could give the impression of holding the key to analysis and meaning, and the students occasionally helped along by e.g. Cliff notes or York notes. Today, the student via laptop, pad or phone has access to equal or more information at his or her fingertips than the lecturing teacher. A discussion on whether the days of traditional literary analysis are numbered is beyond the scope of this article, and it will thus focus on a possible way of adapting classical literature to new times and pedagogical trends. As opposed to the more traditional literary analysis and how we in our time may find recognition in this Victorian poem, this section will shed some light how one may flip the approach: in what way may *The Lady of Shalott*, unbeknown to Tennyson some 190 years later, represent the development of current pedagogical thinking and consequently methodological approaches within learning. The following narrative is one of contextualization, exploring one's mind and possibilities, rather than one of static facts and accepted analysis; an exercise of how one might choose different approaches within the concept of in-depth learning.

The island of Shalott set in a river serving a dual symbol of life and death is in one way part of life through its very existence, but also apart from life as an isolated entity that does not change with the seasons and ongoing life beyond its banks. The towered walls are clearly in sight of the world beyond, accepted by the passers-by who hardly offer them a thought. This setting is much alike the traditional world of education; the towered walls the traditional school building, and the enclosed room occupied by Elaine the classroom, where the teaching of the real world is founded on representation and mirroring of facts provided by teacher and textbooks. As Tennyson has based his 1832 poem on Elaine of Astolat of Arthurian legend, her name will be used when speaking of the lady in question.

Elaine is for all practical measures a prisoner of her room and loom, as Øfsti compares the classroom to a prison where "each prisoner is in solitary confinement - each pupil is isolated at his desk" [my translation] [17]. Unlike Elaine, the learners are for the most part prisoners more of an academic than physical nature. Located at one's loom or desk, one is a recipient of impulses and knowledge, where the outside world is mirrored. The reflected images are described as "shadows of the world", a metaphor that makes it clear they are a poor substitute for seeing directly; just as book learning arguably may be a poor substitute for hands-on experience where received perceptions and knowledge are reproduced through academic work destined for the teacher's drawer.

Not being able to resist the lure and cry of *tirra-lirra* by the bold Sir Lancelot and the world he represents, Elaine throws caution to the wind. By turning to the real world outside her chamber of imprisonment, she seeks a direct communication with knight and world. Turning her attention to look



directly at Sir Lancelot, Elaine de facto breaks the fourth wall. The previously mirrored one-way view of the world outside becomes a direct communication with that same world. As Elaine seeks interaction with the world outside her room, the towers and island, so does the learner in light of the extended classroom.

The river, traditionally a dual literary symbol for life and death, is thus highly befitting for the meaning of the poem and mirrors the flow theory of Csikszentmihalyi. Elaine is certainly in her own bubble, both physically and emotionally, where the boat is an open vessel containing the being in the flow of life. This open vessel, as opposed to the closed castle, is open to all senses and input from the real world. Here the weather, movement of water, and swan song become one with the floating vessel and Elaine. Her collective impressions and emotions are encapsulated in this vessel, likened to Csikszentmihályi's flow state or flow zone where performing the activity of life is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus and full involvement in the process of coming to terms with life and death; a flow characterized by the complete absorption and transformation in sense of time, transcending from one world to another. As with the weaving of the web, Elaine's journey down the river comprises of a collection of input from the world beyond her confine; drifting along in a Woolf stream of consciousness or flow of life, Elaine's life ebbs out on the water much as Virginia Woolf herself is consumed by life and troubles as she ends her days in the river Ouse. Thus, Elaine dies not only surrounded *by*, but also very much a part of emotional and physical input brought upon her by her conscious choice of breaking the spell, or indeed the fourth wall. As the Lady of Shalott breaks the fourth wall, so does the in-depth learner; as opposed to traditional literary analysis, where the professor often will present how a text is to be understood. The professor – or more generally speaking the teacher - providing the students with the opportunity to communicate directly with the poem through their own experiences, ensures the students not only break the fourth wall of academic traditions, but also connect canonical literature to their *own* experiences of life and go with the flow.

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