**Alfred Tennyson**

**"Mariana"**

Text

       ‘Mariana in the moated grange.’

               —Measure for Measure.

With blackest moss the flower-plots

   Were thickly crusted, one and all:

The rusted nails fell from the knots

   That held the pear to the gable-wall.

The broken sheds look’d sad and strange:

   Unlifted was the clinking latch;

   Weeded and worn the ancient thatch

Upon the lonely moated grange.

       She only said, ‘My life is dreary,

           He cometh not,’ she said;

       She said, ‘I am aweary, aweary,

           I would that I were dead!’

Her tears fell with the dews at even;

   Her tears fell ere the dews were dried;

She could not look on the sweet heaven,

   Either at morn or eventide.

After the flitting of the bats,

   When thickest dark did trance the sky,

   She drew her casement-curtain by,

And glanced athwart the glooming flats.

       She only said, ‘The night is dreary,

           He cometh not,’ she said;

       She said, ‘I am aweary, aweary,

           I would that I were dead!’

Upon the middle of the night,

   Waking she heard the night-fowl crow:

The cock sung out an hour ere light:

   From the dark fen the oxen’s low

Came to her: without hope of change,

   In sleep she seem’d to walk forlorn,

   Till cold winds woke the gray-eyed morn

About the lonely moated grange.

       She only said, ‘The day is dreary,

           He cometh not,’ she said;

       She said, ‘I am aweary, aweary,

           I would that I were dead!’

About a stone-cast from the wall

   A sluice with blacken’d waters slept,

And o’er it many, round and small,

   The cluster’d marish-mosses crept.

Hard by a poplar shook alway,

   All silver-green with gnarled bark:

   For leagues no other tree did mark

The level waste, the rounding gray.

       She only said, ‘My life is dreary,

           He cometh not,’ she said;

       She said, ‘I am aweary, aweary,

           I would that I were dead!’

And ever when the moon was low,

   And the shrill winds were up and away,

In the white curtain, to and fro,

   She saw the gusty shadow sway.

But when the moon was very low,

   And wild winds bound within their cell,

   The shadow of the poplar fell

Upon her bed, across her brow.

       She only said, ‘The night is dreary,

           He cometh not,’ she said;

       She said, ‘I am aweary, aweary,

           I would that I were dead!’

All day within the dreamy house,

   The doors upon their hinges creak’d;

The blue fly sung in the pane; the mouse

   Behind the mouldering wainscot shriek’d,

Or from the crevice peer’d about.

   Old faces glimmer’d thro’ the doors,

   Old footsteps trod the upper floors,

Old voices called her from without.

       She only said, ‘My life is dreary,

           He cometh not,’ she said;

       She said, ‘I am aweary, aweary,

           I would that I were dead!’

The sparrow’s chirrup on the roof,

   The slow clock ticking, and the sound

Which to the wooing wind aloof

   The poplar made, did all confound

Her sense; but most she loathed the hour

   When the thick-moted sunbeam lay

   Athwart the chambers, and the day

Was sloping toward his western bower.

       Then, said she, ‘I am very dreary,

           He will not come,’ she said;

       She wept, ‘I am aweary, aweary,

           Oh God, that I were dead!’

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Summary

This poem begins with the description of an abandoned farmhouse, or grange, in which the flower-pots are covered in overgrown moss and an ornamental pear tree hangs from rusty nails on the wall. The sheds stand abandoned and broken, and the straw (“thatch”) covering the roof of the farmhouse is worn and full of weeds. A woman, presumably standing in the vicinity of the farmhouse, is described in a four-line refrain that recurs—with slight modifications—as the last lines of each of the poem’s stanzas: “She only said, ‘My life is dreary / He cometh not,’ she said; / She said, ‘I am aweary, aweary, / I would that I were dead!’”

The woman’s tears fall with the dew in the evening and then fall again in the morning, before the dew has dispersed. In both the morning and the evening, she is unable to look to the “sweet heaven.” At night, when the bats have come and gone, and the sky is dark, she opens her window curtain and looks out at the expanse of land. She comments that “The night is dreary” and repeats her death-wish refrain.

In the middle of the night, the woman wakes up to the sound of the crow, and stays up until the cock calls out an hour before dawn. She hears the lowing of the oxen and seemingly walks in her sleep until the cold winds of the morning come. She repeats the death-wish refrain exactly as in the first stanza, except that this time it is “the day” and not “my life” that is dreary.

Within a stone’s throw from the wall lies an artificial passage for water filled with black waters and lumps of moss. A silver-green poplar tree shakes back and forth and serves as the only break in an otherwise flat, level, gray landscape. The woman repeats the refrain of the first stanza.

When the moon lies low at night, the woman looks to her white window curtain, where she sees the shadow of the poplar swaying in the wind. But when the moon is very low and the winds exceptionally strong, the shadow of the poplar falls not on the curtain but on her bed and across her forehead. The woman says that “the night is dreary” and wishes once again that she were dead.

During the day, the doors creak on their hinges, the fly sings in the window pane, and the mouse cries out or peers from behind the lining of the wall. The farmhouse is haunted by old faces, old footsteps, and old voices, and the woman repeats the refrain exactly as it appears in the first and fourth stanzas.

The woman is confused and disturbed by the sounds of the sparrow chirping on the roof, the clock ticking slowly, and the wind blowing through the poplar. Most of all, she hates the early evening hour when the sun begins to set and a sunbeam lies across her bed chamber. The woman recites an emphatic variation on the death-wish refrain; now it is not “the day,” or even her “life” that is dreary; rather, we read: “Then said she, ‘I am very dreary, / He will not come,’ she said; / She wept, ‘I am aweary, aweary,/ Oh God, that I were dead!’ ”

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Form

“Mariana” takes the form of seven twelve-line stanzas, each of which is divided into three four-line rhyme units according to the pattern ABAB CDDC EFEF. The lines ending in E and F remain essentially the same in every stanza and thus serve as a bewitching, chant-like refrain throughout the poem. All of the poem’s lines fall into iambic tetrameter, with the exception of the trimeter of the tenth and twelfth lines. It is considered a lyrical narrative, while it contains elements of dramatic monologue.

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Commentary

“Mariana” is beautiful and disturbing, a critical favorite of Tennyson’s oeuvre. Published in 1830, it contains some of the same themes as Tennyson’s other famous poems: stasis and a sense of unending time, as in “Tithonus”; isolation and despair, as in “The Lady of Shalott”; and shadow and dreaminess, as in “The Princess.”

The person Mariana is based on Shakespeare’s Mariana from Measure for Measure, who waits in on lonely grange (farm) for her lover Angelo, who has abandoned her; the line there is “Mariana in the moated grange.” The line’s lack of a verb is important because it suggests the stasis that Tennyson so exquisitely conveys in his poem. In the play Angelo does return and the two are reunited, but the sad Mariana of sad Tennyson’s poem does not experience that happy reconciliation.

The poem concerns the decay of the world Mariana inhabits—the lonely grange—and her psychological decay as she waits and yearns for her absent lover. These two types of regression and return to the Earth are completely symbiotic and harmonious. The decay of the physical environment is observed in the moss crusting over the flower pots, the rusted nails falling out of the walls, the broken sheds, the weeds taking over, the blackened waters of the sluice, the creaking hinges of old doors, and the dusty, dreamy house slowly disintegrating. Tennyson’s powers of language and his ability to summon up a hypnotic, melancholy world of ghostly voices and utter stagnation are on full display. The reader sees what Mariana sees: every terrible detail of her seemingly endless existence. The critic Timothy Peltason observes that the poem is “both time-soaked and immobile.”

Mariana’s own decay is observed in her weariness and her despair, in her repetition of the same (or nearly the same) phrases over and over again, and her complete lack of action. She is unable to gaze at the sun “either at morn or eventide” and finds the part of the day when sunbeams fall on her lover’s chamber the most loathsome of the day. The critic G.O. Gunter writes that in this poem Tennyson prefigured the writings of Jung and Freud with his “remarkable insight regarding the workings of the mind,” and Gunter observed that Mariana’s “libido, blocked by the frustrations of her life, flows backward into the past. Her mind is slipping backward to the unconscious.”

Gunter does identify certain energies that seek to combat the decay taking place, and notes, “these energies are indicated by masculine symbols, whereas death and disintegration are associated with feminine elements.” The poplar tree is the best example, a tall phallic symbol that distresses Mariana when its shadow falls across her bed in the evening. It seems evident that she is experiencing sexual frustration as well as other frustrations due to her lover’s absence. Also, in literature trees often symbolize potent life forces, and it is no wonder Mariana is unnerved by it. The wind is also a symbol of life and fecundity and is therefore a threat. It moves things even while her situation does not change. Finally, the sky and the sun are unendurable for the mourning woman; “Mariana can look with comfort only upon darkness, which is symbolic of regression, the unconscious mind, and death.”

Indeed, what Mariana wishes throughout the ordeal is death, an end to her conscious worry over the absence of her lover. This is her refrain: she is so weary, her life and surroundings so dreary, that she would rather be dead. Yet, the paradox is that she does not die or take her life. She is weary enough to prefer death, yet she continues to wait for the lover to return. Finally, at the end of the poem, she has acknowledged the sad likelihood that “he will not come,” but she still does no more than wish for death, finally calling upon God in her sadness. Will she continue to wait?

A reader might wonder whether the poem speaks more broadly—whether Mariana and her sad wait might reflect a larger reality. Perhaps her case represents the psychological situation of others who are trapped in sadness over a loss and cannot move on, like the later Miss Havisham in Dickens’ Great Expectations (1861) who, abandoned on her wedding day, remains unto death in her decaying house. Or perhaps she is in the position of those who have waited a long time for the return of the Christ and have a pessimistic view of the world in the meantime. The refrain of the poem functions like an incantation, which contributes to the atmosphere of enchantment. The abandoned grange seems to be under a spell or curse; Mariana is locked in a state of perpetual, introverted brooding. Her consciousness paces a cell of melancholy; she can perceive the world only through her dejection. Thus, all of the poet’s descriptions of the physical world serve as primarily psychological categories; it is not the grange, but the person, who has been abandoned—so, too, has this woman’s mind been abandoned by her sense. This is an example of the “pathetic fallacy.” Coined by the nineteenth-century writer John Ruskin, this phrase refers to our tendency to attribute our emotional and psychological states to the natural world. Thus, because Mariana is so forlorn, her farmhouse, too, although obviously incapable of emotion, seems dejected, depressed; when the narrator describes her walls he is seeing not the indifferent white of the paint, but rather focuses on the dark shadows there. While Ruskin considered the excessive use of the fallacy to be the mark of an inferior poet, later poets (such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound) would use the pathetic fallacy liberally and to great effect. Arguably, Tennyson here also uses the method to create great emotional force.

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