Allegories of Temporal Experience: The Late Work of Frederic Leighton

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ALLEGORIES OF TEMPORAL EXPERIENCE:
THE LATE WORK OF FREDERIC LEIGHTON

by

SARAH V. LEONARD

Under the Direction of Dr. Maria P. Gindhart

ABSTRACT

The late paintings of Victorian artist Frederic Leighton generally embody an abstract idea or concept instead of a specific story or moral. Many of these images express humanity’s experience of the passage of time as it relates to life, death, and rebirth. Leighton’s paintings The Garden of the Hesperides (c. 1892), Lachrymae (c. 1894-95), and Flaming June (1895) represent allegories of timelessness, death, and regeneration, respectively.

INDEX WORDS: Frederic Leighton, Victorian painting, Allegory, Garden of the Hesperides, Lachrymae, Flaming June
ALLEGORIES OF TEMPORAL EXPERIENCE:
THE LATE WORK OF FREDERIC LEIGHTON

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Dr. Maria P. Gindhart.
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INTRODUCTION

The Victorian painter Lord Frederic Leighton (1830-1896), Royal Academician and President of the English Royal Academy, produced a large *oeuvre* of history paintings, landscapes, portraits, figurative works, one mural, and two sculptures within a relatively brief lifespan of sixty-five years. With a polished style heavily influenced by years of Continental training, Leighton specialized in figurative history paintings, usually illustrating an episode from Greek mythology. While Leighton had painted some non-narrative works earlier in his career, such as his *Odalisque* (1862) and *Summer Moon* (1872), his late subject matter focused almost exclusively on languid or sleeping female figures isolated in dreamy environments. As the art historian Christopher Newall remarks: “The paintings of Leighton’s late career … must be understood as symbols of human existence and mortality rather than representations of an ostensible narrative.”¹ Sometimes vaguely mythological yet frequently unrelated to any narrative, these mysterious women evoke wistful and poignant meditations on the experiential nature of time. No three paintings demonstrate this tendency better than *The Garden of the Hesperides* (c. 1892), *Lachrymae* (c. 1894-95), and *Flaming June* (1895). Indeed, these three works in particular visualize a conversation with the viewer on the nature of existence and explore how one confronts the passage of time and the inevitability of death. These paintings lack the traditional symbols associated with the passage of time (skulls, candles, watches, cut flowers, etc.) because they do not concern themselves with time itself. Rather, their subject matter explores how the human condition struggles to come to terms with mortality. Three distinct approaches to the temporal, human condition are the fantasy of timelessness, the sober

perception of death as an absolute end, and the concept of nature’s eternal cycle of death and regeneration.

I argue that through subject matter, formal qualities, iconography, and context within Leighton’s oeuvre, these late paintings function as allegories of timelessness, death, and regeneration. To this end, I also discuss Leighton’s theories of aesthetics as put forth in his addresses to the Royal Academy, exploring how his theories intersect with contemporary aesthetics and Hegelian theories. I argue that Leighton’s problematic engagement with Hegelian aesthetics serves to isolate his paintings from the idea of an historical development of aesthetics. This sense of isolation establishes Leighton’s images as entities separate from the Hegelian tradition; they exist apart from an Hegelian model, thus freeing themselves from any predetermined meaning. This detached position heightens the paintings’ sense of introspection, intensifying their effectiveness as allegories related to human emotion.

Considering his eminent position within Victorian painting, his artistic and social successes, and his long tenure as President of the Royal Academy, the quantity of scholarship on Leighton remains moderate. While his entire body of work deserves more attention, his late works offer particularly rich opportunities for research. Furthermore, while many books and articles discuss his later work, particularly Flaming June and other images of sleeping women, they neglect the full allegorical potential of these works. In my thesis, I hope to correct this oversight.

The final chapter of Kenneth Bendiner’s Introduction to Victorian Painting (1965) discusses Leighton’s images of sleeping women and their relation to themes of death. While he focuses on Flaming June, linking the work to both Michelangelo’s Night (c. 1530) and Symbolist paintings, Bendiner also analyzes related works featuring sleeping women, such as Summer
Moon and Cymon and Iphigenia (1884). He briefly discusses Lachrymae’s relation to Victorian funerary art and death symbolism. This source has helped me analyze the full symbolic meaning of sleep and sleep-like states of being in Flaming June and other works.

Leonée and Richard Ormond’s monograph Lord Leighton (1975) follows a biographical format, detailing the artist’s early life and continental training; major works such as Cimabue’s Madonna (1853-55); his artistic roles as Academician, Classical painter, and President; his relationship to other artists, including the poet Browning; and finally his late paintings, including Flaming June and The Garden of the Hesperides. The chronological format helps situate the late works in relation to one another. This source also offers biographical insight into Leighton’s possible artistic motivations. The Ormonds have also written multiple catalogue entries on specific Leighton paintings.

Ian Jenkins’s article “Frederic Lord Leighton and Greek Vases” (1983) analyzes Leighton’s portrayal of antique pottery in his work, including Lachrymae. Jenkins notes that while the vases in the works of some classicists, like Sir Laurence Alma-Tadema, were archeologically accurate, those in Leighton’s are less so. He concludes that Leighton uses anachronistic Greek vases to invoke a romantic, Classical atmosphere rather than try to recreate historically accurate scenes. Because these scenes are historically inaccurate, they evoke a strong sense of timeless romanticism. In this sense, their timelessness refers not to the absence of time or its progression, but to the fiction of universality imposed upon the images. This helps emphasize my argument that Leighton’s late paintings explore allegories related to experiencing the emotional effects of passing time.

Together, Stephen Jones, Christopher Newall, Richard and Leonée Ormond, and Benedict Read authored Frederic, Lord Leighton: Eminent Victorian Artist. This catalogue and
collection of essays accompanied the exhibition of Leighton’s work held at the Royal Academy of Arts from February 15 to April 21, 1996, to mark the centenary of the artist’s death. In addition to providing information about specific works, these sources have aided my analysis of Leighton’s style.

Elizabeth Prettejohn has also written extensively about Victorian Aestheticism and Frederic Leighton. Her large survey of Aesthetic painting, *Art for Art’s Sake: Aestheticism in Victorian Painting* (2007), includes a chapter devoted to Leighton’s classicism. She also coauthored *Frederic Leighton: Antiquity, Renaissance, Modernity* (1999) with T.J. Barringer. Prettejohn’s work is crucial to my argument that Leighton’s use of Aestheticism and Hegelian aesthetics communicates messages about experience, which has helped me analyze the temporal impressions of Leighton’s late work.

Keren Hammerschlag’s recent article “The Deathly Sleep of Leighton’s Painted Women” (2012) analyzes *Cymon and Iphigenia*, *The Garden of the Hesperides*, and *Flaming June*. She argues that in these late paintings, Leighton uses sleep to simulate death and portray a pleasurable descent into unconsciousness. The author links the women’s elongated necks and complex drapery to ideas of bodily dissolution and subconscious wanderings. This article supports my analysis of the meanings of sleep, death, and temporal suspension.

The first chapter argues that *The Garden of the Hesperides* functions as an allegory of timelessness. After discussing the painting’s mythological subject matter and literary sources, I analyze the iconography and style. I explain how the mythological subject matter and Biblical “Garden of Eden” imagery combine to create an aura of agelessness. By collapsing both Classical and Biblical imagery into one image, Leighton creates a nonspecific paradise that appears to transcend time. I also analyze the composition’s focus on circular movement and
stasis, demonstrating how that communicates the idea of timelessness and perpetual motion. Finally, I discuss the work’s relationship to aesthetics, explaining how that influences the detached, independent perception of the piece.

Chapter Two interprets *Lachrymae* as an allegory of death. I analyze the traditional Victorian symbols for death and mourning, including the cypress trees, dark colors, funerary urn, dead leaves, and sunset. I also compare the model’s gesture and pose with Leighton’s *Captive Andromache* (c. 1888) and other contemporary works that deal with subjects of mourning, loss, and death. Last, I analyze the painting’s style and composition, explaining how the colors, brushwork, and the arrangement of shapes work together to express nobility, heaviness, loss, and sorrow.

In Chapter Three, I argue that *Flaming June* represents an allegory of regeneration. I compare *Flaming June* to other paintings of sleeping women by Leighton, such as *Summer Moon, Cymon and Iphigenia, and Summer Slumber* (c. 1894) in order to trace the associations sleep has within Leighton’s work. I argue that sleep alludes to a state of symbolic death and that awakening symbolizes rebirth. In addition, I analyze the symbolism within *Flaming June*, such as that of the glittering strip of ocean seen in the background, the plants gathered on the window sill, and the female figure herself. Finally, I consider how the painting’s central, pinwheel-like composition, including the model’s pose; square format; sensual yet delicate brushwork; vibrant color; and enigmatic atmosphere all contribute to the painting’s allegorical representation of regeneration.

In my conclusion, I question whether or not Leighton intended his late paintings as direct expressions of his own feelings regarding death and the afterlife. Although he did paint these images during a period of declining health just prior to his death, this fact does not guarantee any
conscious biographical intent. I also suggest further paths this research could take in the future: for example, Leighton’s treatment of female allegory in relation to the Academic tradition as a whole and how the convention of female allegory developed over the course of the Victorian period. Finally, I conclude by suggesting that the paintings establish a fascinating triad of sentiments regarding the nature of existence, whether that existence is personal or impersonal, mortal or divine, brief or everlasting.
THE GARDEN OF THE HESPERIDES: AN ALLEGORY OF TIMELESSNESS

In Frederic Leighton’s golden-hued tondo The Garden of the Hesperides (c. 1892; Figure 1.1), three languid beauties recline under the low branches of an orange tree. They are Aegle, Arethusa, and Hesperia, the daughters of the Greek evening god Hesperus. Along with the dragon Ladon, the three sisters guarded the apples given by the earth to Hera on the occasion of her marriage to Zeus.1 Here, Ladon is an enormous serpent, and the apples are transformed into oranges. Although the utopian ideal is disturbed when the hero Hercules eventually steals the magical fruit, the scene illustrated here projects a heady aura of timelessness. The moment of afternoon languor enjoyed within the shade of a fragrant orange tree seems frozen in time, as if it has always existed and always will. Within the self-contained world of Leighton’s The Garden of the Hesperides, the multilayered iconography, formal elements, inert sense of narrative, and relationship to contemporary Victorian aesthetics and Hegelian theory all coalesce to form an allegory of timelessness.

The Classically-educated Victorian viewers of Leighton’s day were probably familiar with the story; however, viewers today may struggle to identify what has become a more obscure myth. Like all Classical myths, tales of the garden of the Hesperides vary from poet to poet. In the Greek poet Apollodorus’s account of the eleventh labor of Hercules, the author mentions four Hesperides: Aegle, Erythia, Hesperia, and Arethusa. Along with an immortal dragon, the Hesperides guarded the golden apples given by Earth to Zeus and Hera as a wedding gift. Identified as the offspring of Typhon and Echidna, the dragon sported a hundred heads, which spoke with different voices. During his quest to the garden, Hercules freed the chained Prometheus, thus rescuing him from Zeus’s eagle. Prometheus told Hercules to send Atlas to

fetch the golden apples. Atlas returned with three, which Hercules brought to Eurystheus, who assigns Hercules’s labors. Apollodorus notes that in some versions of the tale, Hercules picked the apples himself after killing the guardian snake. Afterwards, Athena returned the apples to the Hesperides, thereby restoring order.  

In Apollonius Rhodius’s *Argonautica*, which relates the adventures of Jason and the Argonauts, the Hesperides also make an appearance. Apollonius portrays the Hesperides as golden-haired, mysterious, life-giving songstresses. In this epic poem, Jason and his fellow travelers come to the garden of the Hesperides desperately searching for water. There, they find three nymphs—Hespere, Eretheis, and Aegle—who stand around the golden apple tree mourning the death of the serpent Ladon, whom Hercules had killed the day before with poisonous arrows. As the Argonauts approach, the nymphs transform themselves into dust. After the Argonauts plead for help, the Hesperides cause grass to sprout from the ground and then spring from the earth as trees. Aegle speaks to the travelers, pointing out a stream that Hercules had caused to flow the day before.

Leighton’s own source for his painting, however, was not Classical; it was, in fact, a short passage from John Milton’s 1634 play *Comus*. The critic Frederic George Stephens, who frequently included Leighton’s own statements in his pieces for the magazine *Athenaeum*, claimed that Leighton’s inspiration came from the following quote, in which a spirit describes his return to “happy climes”: “… the liquid ayr / All amid the Gardens fair / of Hesperus and his daughters three / That sing about the golden tree.” This passage is crucial for understanding Leighton’s painting, for it focuses exclusively on an atmospheric scene of total calm. These

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lines invoke a sensuous mirage of a summer’s afternoon spent in a “fair” garden; the “liquid ayr” suggests a balmy, still climate; and the Hesperides “sing about the golden tree,” explaining the proliferation of gold tones and the singing sister in Leighton’s image. Milton describes the garden as profoundly static: a paradise suspended by magic wherein nothing ever happens. One could even go so far as to envision the garden as a metaphor for a peaceful state of mind. After all, the Attendant Spirit in Milton’s play returns to these “happy climes” from the chaotic world of man. Both Milton and Leighton focus on this atmosphere of eternal bliss and calm, and neither of them feel it necessary to bring the violent hero Hercules into the picture. Thus, in their version of this heavenly garden, there is no outside intrusion into a paradise of eternal summer.

Multi-layered iconography also enhances the theme of timelessness in Leighton’s painting. For example, the central fruit tree and serpent immediately call to mind not only the dwelling place of the Hesperides, but also the Biblical Garden of Eden. Leighton could have portrayed the dragon as the typical bat-winged, lizard-like monster, as he does in Perseus and Andromeda (c. 1891; Figure 1.2). Instead, he chooses the serpentine interpretation. Furthermore, the monster in question wraps itself around a tree laden with forbidden fruit in a beautiful, prelapsarian setting; Ladon even seems to address one of the young women. Indeed, if Leighton had only painted one goddess, the Victorian viewer would perhaps confuse her with Eve. Biblical imagery thus mixes with Classical imagery, creating an iconographic hybrid of Christian scripture and pagan myth. By mixing ancient paradises, Leighton creates a fantasy world that seems to transcend historical specificity and projects an aura of universality and timelessness.

In addition to its conspicuous Biblical connotations, Leighton’s picture also highlights another important symbol: the sun. Leighton’s later mythological work often features the sun as
a central, energizing presence. He explores this theme most thoroughly in his two treatments of Clytie: one, a landscape exhibited in 1892, and the other, a figurative work left unfinished at his death (Figure 3.2). According to Ovid, Clytie was the rejected lover of Apollo, the god of the sun. For nine days the heartbroken Clytie stared at the sun; finally, she was transformed into a sunflower so that she could look at her beloved forever.\(^5\) This story emphasizes sunlight as a captivating and divine force worth worshipping. Art historian Christopher Newall writes that the sun and its mythical personifications are also important elements in the iconography of *The Garden of the Hesperides*. Within this painting, the sparkling sunlight seems curiously clear and golden at the same time, as if here too Leighton meant to portray the heavenly rays of the sun god. The three nymphs, “made torpid by the sound of their own music and the warmth of the sun,”\(^6\) appear intoxicated, as if basking in warmth so sweet it is literally divine. The coveted fruit itself seems to echo the symbolic importance of the sun. In the light of this garden, the oranges become little flaming suns: sweet, corporeal manifestations of Apollo’s heavenly, life-giving rays.

In addition to its iconography, the painting’s harmonious formal elements also clarify the overall meaning. Leighton biographers Leonée and Richard Ormond call *The Garden of the Hesperides* “… formally perhaps Leighton’s most perfect work.”\(^7\) Of all the structural elements, the painting’s circular format is perhaps the most significant, and its importance to both the image’s composition and theme cannot be overemphasized. The circle itself is a common symbol of continuity, having neither beginning nor end. Therefore, it is hardly likely that Leighton chose this format at random for *Garden of the Hesperides*. Not only does this format suggest eternity, it also directs the viewer’s eye around the picture plane in a circular fashion.

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\(^6\) Ibid., 128
Once the viewer’s gaze enters the round confines of this self-contained world, it requires effort to break out again. The tondo format also references the Italian Renaissance. While Renaissance artists such as Michelangelo and Raphael may not have used the tondo to suggest ideas of eternity, Leighton’s use of it does. By framing a Victorian painting with a format associated with a past era, Leighton again infuses his image with a sense of timelessness. In this way, the circular format renders the image harmonious, balanced, and static. Although Hercules will eventually invade the peaceful domain to steal the fruit as one of his twelve labors, for now the warm sunlight shines peacefully on a benign and lethargic scene.

The forms within the painting itself complement the circular frame. The snake loops and coils around the enormous tree trunk, emphasizing circularity and, by extension, “unbroken perfection.” Heavy clusters of ripe, round oranges hang from the branches; the background trees sport puffs of round, cloudlike foliage; the figure in green dips her fingers in a golden bowl; and the central figure even twists herself into a circular form. Inconspicuous and well-integrated into the composition, these circles gently reassert the theme of unbroken perpetuity.

In addition to the emphasis on circularity, the shapes and forms of Leighton’s unique, convoluted draperies enhance the painting’s atmosphere of self-contained languor. During his career, the Academician was often criticized for his meandering draperies, which his critics thought failed to adequately show the form underneath. Ironically, Leighton had criticized this very characteristic of fifteenth-century German sculpture in his 1893 Academy address: “Again, an innate leaning to the angular, and a reaction against the lengthened clinging lines once imposed on Sculpture by the controlling architect, led to a vehement crinkling and tossing of

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8 Ibid., 131.
10 Ibid., 233.
draperies, which bore no relation … to the gaunt and bony limbs they clad…”

Perhaps Leighton noticed this inconsistency because he found it either interesting or expressive, because he seems to use a similar technique in his own work. While the general forms of legs and torsos are visible in *The Garden of the Hesperides*, Leighton does indeed take liberties with the fabric. In certain areas, particularly around the knees of the woman in green and below the knees of the central figure, the draperies pool and eddy like water. Many of the drapery patterns here appear serpentine, perhaps to complement the Hesperides’s reptile companion. When surveying this drowsy scene, the viewer’s eye can easily become lost in the abstract patterns created within the convoluted folds of Leighton’s draperies, encouraging the eye to linger among the maze of irregular, organic forms.

Although Leighton’s Michelangelesque style clearly favored line over tone, his expert use of color cannot be overlooked. Color plays a vital role within the composition, contributing to the overall sensory impact. Scholars frequently comment on the picture’s lush, tropical atmosphere. Indeed, the oranges, pinks, gold, warm flesh tones, and creamy whites instill a sense of heady languor throughout the landscape. The cool shades of the ocean, the greenery, and the third sister’s deep green dress only serve to complement and intensify the warm shades. The colors thus infuse the entire atmosphere with a radiating sense of pleasant warmth. The sparkling colors combine with the olfactory suggestions of fragrant oranges and fresh coastal air, while the singing sister, lyre, and white egrets evoke an auditory hallucination of song and the calls of sea birds.

That Leighton chose to depict this static moment, rather than a more active scene, such as the actual theft, proves highly significant—the still, tranquil atmosphere invites the viewer to

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contemplate the arrangement of forms and the painting’s mood, rather than recreate the drama. The choice of portraying a static moment in the narrative also characterizes Victorian Classicism as a whole. Art historian Christopher Wood writes: “There are few battles, or bacchic feasts, in Victorian classical painting. Full-blooded passion was not for the Victorians; they feared it, and when they tried to paint it, they generally failed. The Victorians preferred to contemplate the consequences, or the reflection of love, rather than the passion itself.”\(^{12}\) Indeed, when Leighton tried to paint more active scenes, such as the rescue of Andromeda, Persephone’s emergence from Hades, or Perseus’ flight from the island of the gorgons (Figure 1.3), the figures seem stiff. The figures appear to pose at a particular moment in the narrative, and the story in its entirety does not seem actually to take place. In *The Garden of the Hesperides*, one of Leighton’s most successful paintings, the contemplative, static mood meshes perfectly with the subject matter and composition. The figures appear relaxed, not frozen; stillness becomes the natural order, not a condition imposed upon the scene by current aesthetic trends.

Various theories of aesthetics, including those of the Victorian Aesthetic movement, Leighton’s own ideas, and Hegelian aesthetics, frame the artist’s works as surely as any ornate gilt border. The Victorian Classical Revival was one facet of the larger Aesthetic Movement, both of which were reactions against the overwhelming influence of critic John Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites of the 1850’s.\(^{13}\) According to Ruskin’s *Modern Painters I*, “… the art is greatest, which conveys to the mind of the spectator, by any means whatsoever, the greatest number of the greatest ideas, and I call an idea great in proportion as it is received by a higher faculty of the mind, and as it more fully occupies, and in occupying exercises and exalts, the


\(^{13}\) Ibid., 176.
faculty by which it is received.”¹⁴ In other words, great art should not merely imitate nature, but must communicate a great idea, and in doing so, must improve the viewer. While Ruskin advocated moral and didactic content,¹⁵ Aestheticism held that beauty itself was the true goal of all art and design. In theory, art could exist for its own sake, rather than serve as the vehicle for a political, religious, or educational message. While the main accomplishment of the Aesthetic Movement was its reassessment of the decorative arts, painting was also key to the movement.¹⁶

In his 1881 Royal Academy address, Leighton shared his opinions regarding the opposing doctrines of didacticism and Aestheticism. Instead of advocating one theory or the other, he combined them into his own hybrid theory regarding artistic beauty and the morality of the artist himself. According to Leighton, “whilst Art is indeed, in its own nature, wholly independent of Morality, and whilst the loftiest moral purport can add no jot or tittle [sic] to the merits of a work of Art, as such, there is, nevertheless, no error deeper or more deadly … than to deny that the moral complexion, the ethos, of the artist does in truth tinge every work of his hand ….”¹⁷ Leighton had devoted his 1879 address to art history and the emotional elements of art, only briefly mentioning the ethical aspects of art “merely lest I should seem to you to ignore it.”¹⁸ For Leighton, the source of art lay in the artist’s desire to communicate his own emotions to the viewer visually:

Primarily the source of all art whatsoever … is the consciousness of emotion in the presence of the phenomena of Life and Nature. This conscious emotion, this momentary intensification of some direct form of personal utterance, ejaculation, or movement of the body, or through the endeavor to imitate the object which aroused it, called Art into existence; for Art is based on the desire to express and the power to kindle in others emotion astir in the artist, and latent in those to whom he addresses himself.¹⁹

¹⁵ One must keep in mind that Ruskin’s aesthetic theories are complex and contradictory. Here, I focus on his belief that art should create an elevated citizenry.
¹⁷ Leighton, *Addresses Delivered to the Students of the Royal Academy by the Late Lord Leighton*, 42.
¹⁸ Ibid., 25.
¹⁹ Ibid., 14.
Thus, although Leighton’s theory may privilege Aesthetics, it is certainly not purely formal and devoid of spiritual meaning—human emotion and experience also come into play. Time and time again he stresses the deeper spiritual meaning of artistic production, a meaning that lies in humanity’s ability to connect with nature. For instance, Leighton cites humanity’s need to personify the universe, as in the anthromorphic impulse that led the Ancients to visualize the planets in their own image, and in the practice of poetic metaphor. In the following anecdote, Leighton eloquently expresses this sentiment:

But beyond this transforming activity of the imagination there is a deeper and more intimate sentiment which mixes with our perception of the aspects of Nature, a sense of their direct relation to man and of the influence on our consciousness of his presence or absence in their midst. I will give you an instance which is probably within the experience of you all. You have been contemplating somewhere, far away in the falling daylight, some broad sweep of empty, uninhabited moor, such as Mason might have loved to paint; you are impressed with its silent solitude, it weighs upon you; presently you discover in the gloom a glimmering streak, winding towards the horizon; it is a path; the footprints of men have suddenly lit up the loneliness of the scene, a vague image of the narrow stream of life that comes and goes along that solitary track is stirred within you and has quickened and greatly heightened the poetic force of your emotions.

Here, Leighton demonstrates in his aesthetic theory a poetic depth comparable to the nineteenth-century Romantic painters. This helps explain why Leighton’s art is never merely classical: the artist imbues every picture with the weight of spiritual integrity. Leighton’s figures in *The Garden of the Hesperides* provide excellent examples of this phenomenon; for despite their languorous poses and peaceful demeanors, they glow with the spiritual intensity behind human emotion. Beneath a restrained classical exterior lies a rich spiritual depth. Here, as in all of his successful paintings, the brushstroke of a skilled and sensitive artist becomes its own path of footprints into a landscape: a sign of the human presence among the wilderness of experience.

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20 Ibid., 17-18.
21 Ibid., 18-19.
Leighton’s unique theory of artistic spirituality shares an interesting relationship with Hegel’s aesthetics. In her book *Art for Art’s Sake: Aestheticism in Victorian Painting*, Elizabeth Prettejohn analyzes the connections between Hegelian theories and Leighton’s work. She demonstrates that Leighton was familiar with and influenced by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s philosophies, yet he did not replicate them in their entirety. The young artist made a brief reference to Hegel in a letter to his mother of 1852, and his Academy Addresses demonstrate familiarity with Hegel’s theories. For example, in Leighton’s very first address, he reiterates Hegel’s view that the contemporary era is a self-conscious age incapable of the spontaneous artistic activity of ages past. However, unlike Hegel, Leighton does not predict the end of art. Leighton again references Hegel’s ideas with his painting *The Triumph of Music* (1855-56); here, Prettejohn argues that Leighton supplies Orpheus with a violin instead of a lyre, suggesting an attempt to make the scene more accessible to modern audiences with Hegel’s concept of the necessary anachronism (Hegel had actually cautioned against this specific anachronism, but it is not clear if Leighton knew or understood the passage). In addition, in a letter of 1873, Leighton expresses his dislike of the restraint of costume, analogous to Hegel’s own preference for the freedom afforded by drapery. Both Leighton and Hegel felt that draperies could complement the underlying idea of the artwork in a way that modern costume could not.

According to Hegel’s *Aesthetics*, the history of art consists of three definite categories: the Symbolic, the Classical, and the Romantic. In the Symbolic stage, the shape or form of art merely represents, or symbolizes, a spiritual Idea. In the Classical stage, the external shape and

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23 Ibid., 131-32.
24 Ibid., 133-34.
25 Ibid., 138.
26 Ibid., 140-41.
Idea are fully unified, producing the Ideal, or the beautiful. While classical art is more mature than symbolic art, it lacks the full expressiveness of the Romantic. In the Romantic, the Idea finally triumphs over its sensual embodiment.

Leighton both utilizes and breaks down a Hegelian framework. While Leighton was influenced by Hegel’s theories, he was ultimately not interested in replicating his chronology. His paintings are classic, and yet they are spiritual at the same time—Leighton’s own theories of aesthetics put forth in his Academy Addresses affirm that. Because his paintings both engage with and exist outside of Hegel’s strict pattern of chronological aesthetics, they do not occupy a point on a line of development. They do not seem belong to an historic stage; instead, they appear to occupy their own bubble somewhere off to the side of Hegel’s chronology, immune to the march of aesthetic development, and consequently, of time itself. I would like to suggest that in both engaging with and violating a Hegelian framework, Leighton’s art produces an effect of timelessness. This effect manifests itself triumphantly in *The Garden of the Hesperides*.

One may ask, how could art possibly belong to two separate Hegelian categories? If one attempts to categorize Leighton’s paintings within a Hegelian framework, then are they not Classical? Leighton’s art does share many affinities with Hegel’s category of the Classical, in more ways than its frequent classical subject matter. For instance, the gazes of Leighton’s figures do not interact with the viewer in the way they would in Romantic art. Leighton’s classical figures typically close their eyes, hide them, or look away, and their psychology and emotions remain closed to the viewer. Hegel believed that “the light of the eye” expressed Romantic emotion, whereas the eyes of Greek sculpture remained unfocused and expressionless. Because the Idea and form of classical art are unified, the figures are therefore complete and independent from the spectator. The gazes (or lack thereof) of Leighton’s figures therefore
appear classical in a Hegelian sense. Moreover, from the mid-1860’s onward, Leighton’s art focused almost exclusively on the beautiful human body, which according to Hegel, was the quintessential representation of the Ideal in art. Even Leighton’s Biblical and Orientalist pictures display this classical emphasis on the human body. Leighton’s work thus conforms to Hegel’s classical art form in that the ideal human body itself serves as the vehicle of meaning.

But problems come from this hasty categorization. For one, Hegel’s classical stage was inferior to modern romantic art, so how can one theorize a modern classicism based on Hegel’s theories? Furthermore, Hegel associated each of his three stages with a specific medium. Sculpture belonged to the classic stage, while painting belonged to the romantic. Recombining these pairings caused problems: for example, Hegel considered painting in the classical manner a grave error, criticizing the German neoclassicist Anton Raphael Mengs for portraying classical art in what he believed to be the romantic medium. In addition, Hegel considered the classical stage pagan, and the romantic stage Christian, and he believed that the human spirit could not regress once it had experienced the Christian revelation. All of these objections point away from the idea of Leighton as a Hegelian classicist.

Indeed, Prettejohn notes that while Leighton appears to follow some features of Hegel’s aesthetic philosophy, he outright defies some of its most important characteristics. Therefore, Leighton’s art consistently tests Hegel’s aesthetic theory, questioning whether the classical art-form can express the modern human spirit. Perhaps it cannot, in a strict Hegelian sense, but classical art-forms certainly express the late nineteenth-century spirit of Aestheticism.

27 Ibid., 140-41.
28 Ibid., 141-44.
29 Ibid., 151.
30 Ibid., 158.
31 Ibid., 160.
Leighton’s unique hybrid of aesthetic theories not only suggests that *The Garden of the Hesperides* serves as an allegory of timelessness; it also sets his work as a whole apart from the larger Academic tradition. His expert configurations of beautiful human bodies, fluttering drapery, and gorgeous landscape go far beyond mere imitation or technique; they take on an additional spiritual meaning. This spirituality extends to all of his best works, especially those paintings executed near the end of his life. Whether Leighton’s graying hair and declining health prompted the artist to muse on the nature of existence or the passage of time is difficult to say. However, his late paintings do explore the themes of time and how humans experience this phenomenon: whether that is through ideas of timelessness and eternity, or, as will be argued later, through themes of death and regeneration.

In conclusion, *The Garden of the Hesperides* exists apart from the world and yet not divorced from human experience. In the world of the gods, perhaps humanity expresses its own innate fear against the march of time, its own desire for eternal life. Leighton’s expert configuration of form, color, and iconography and his own aesthetic philosophies converge into an allegorical representation of this desire. Leighton’s painting materializes this desire for immortality and everlasting peace, thus creating a golden, self-contained world of divine calm, timeless beauty, and everlasting afternoon sunshine.
Figure 1.2: Frederic Leighton, *Perseus and Andromeda*, c. 1891, Source: Artstor
Figure 1.3: Frederic Leighton, *Perseus on Pegasus*, 1895-96, Source: Artstor
2 LACHRYMAE: AN ALLEGORY OF DEATH

As philosophic concepts, death and time are intimately related. Theoretically, time exists independently of humanity, but humans cannot measure time without organizing it into segments; otherwise, time becomes chaotic and meaningless. In this manner, marking time becomes a way of assigning innumerable tiny deaths to an otherwise incomprehensible notion of existence. In its own morbid way, the passage of time becomes a form of death: the day dies as night approaches, the year expires with the coming of December’s end, and with each passing day, human beings grow closer to death. Indeed, death marks the end of one’s own time, providing the lifetime’s only true defining feature. While reflecting on death may be uncomfortable or depressing, this concept of temporal organization provides one of the key methods for conceptualizing time.

Frederic Leighton’s 1895 canvas Lachrymae (Figure 2.1) transforms the sober notion of the interrelationship of time and death into a highly expressive work of visual poetry. The painting addresses three forms of death: one’s own death, signified by the funeral urn; the death of a loved one, indicated by the mourning woman; and death as a symbolic end, suggested by the wilted wreath, setting sun, and deepening shadows. As this chapter will show, the painting’s iconography, harmonious formal construction, and relationships to other paintings by Leighton contribute to the work’s poignant sense of heaviness and loss. All of these aspects combine to form a complex allegory of death, including the painful experience of witnessing death and the disquieting knowledge that one’s own time will eventually run out.

In all likelihood, the visual sources of Lachrymae originate from the long-dead world of the Ancients. Art historian Ian Jenkins suggests that the painting’s composition may have been inspired by Classical vase-painting; Attic vases of the fifth century B.C. and South Italian vases
of the fourth century B.C. also feature scenes of one or more figures sitting or standing by a funerary monument. Attic white-ground lekythoi, pottery meant to hold offerings of oil at the tomb, came to feature similar scenes. Besides the obvious connection with tomb décor, the painting’s link with classical pottery highlights the picture’s theme of mortality. Although Ancient Greece was an enduring and highly influential civilization, it too perished; its writings, sculpture, and pottery shards still exist, serving as reminders that nothing lasts forever, even the hallowed world of the ancients.

The painting’s most immediate source could have been two 1886 plays by G.C. Warr, for which Leighton was one of the scene designers. The text and music of Warr’s plays, which were a retelling of Aeschylus’s Oresteia and an adaption of Homer entitled The Tale of Troy, were reprinted in two souvenir volumes illustrated by Walter Crane. Several of Crane’s illustrations were based off of the set designs of Warr’s plays, of which Leighton had obtained a souvenir copy. In the illustration Echoes of Hellas, Crane depicts Electra and her libation-bearers mourning around the funerary stele of Agamemnon, also set against a forested background. This illustration, or its original conception as a set piece, could have influenced Leighton’s painting.¹ It also seems possible that Leighton and his fellow designers could have based their scenes on Greek vase-painting, for Sir Charles Newton, the retired Keeper of Greek and Roman Antiquities at the British Museum, had served as their archeological advisor.² If so, Classical pottery would still remain the original, albeit indirect, source of Lachrymae.

² Ibid.
Lachrymae is Latin for “tears,” and its traditional iconography makes the allegory all the more effective. A classicized version of the bowed statues found in Victorian cemeteries, the raven-haired, grief-stricken Grecian maid wears black and purple mourning robes as she stands by a funerary urn perched on an austere Doric column. In the immediate background stands a cypress; this tree is traditionally associated with death, because once cut it does not regenerate. The tree and the main figure, which block out the last failing rays of the life-giving sun, continue the upward motion of the column. The dead leaves scattered at the monument’s base signify autumn, reminding the viewer of the summer’s yearly death and the cycle of life. The evergreen laurel bushes indicate immortality, suggesting that the memory of her loved one will not be forgotten. And yet, a wilted laurel wreath lies discarded among dead leaves on the marble base of the memorial. This wilted wreath confirms that nothing can live forever, and that memories stay alive only through those dedicated survivors who visit tombs to replace fading greenery. A distant sunset, golden and yet sad at the same time, peeps through the gloomy forest.

Reminiscent of a funeral pyre, the background glow underscores the theme of endings yet again.

One also discovers symbolic value in the painting’s vertical compositional elements. Here, as in The Garden of the Hesperides, Leighton mixes Classical imagery with Christian symbolism. The emphasis on verticality was used in Neo-Gothic architecture, as it refers to the deceased spirit’s upward motion, resurrection, and closeness to God. In addition, the compositional device of the cross formed by the column and low wall, used frequently by the

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5 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Frederic Leighton: Lachrymae (Mary Lloyd) (96.28).”
7 Ibid.
8 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Frederic Leighton: Lachrymae (Mary Lloyd) (96.28).”
earlier Pre-Raphaelites, signifies the end of continuity and happiness within a stage of life. This symbolic cross, which also holds Christian connotations, stands appropriately in the background, forming the emotional landscape within which the mourner treads. Unlike *The Garden of the Hesperides*, this mixture of pagan and Christian imagery does not evoke an air of timelessness; instead, it underscores humanity’s worldly death and colors the scene with a somber reminder of the crucifixion.

Leighton’s anachronistic use of classical pottery also underscores the image’s status as a moody, allegorical representation of an abstract concept. According to a catalogue entry for the exhibition *Victorian High Renaissance*, “[t]he reviewer of [the magazine] *The Academy* questioned the propriety of placing a fifth-century earthenware vase on a half Doric column, but such archaeological exactitude was also alien to Leighton’s sensibility. He was concerned with the expression of a melancholy poetic idea in a generalized classical setting.” The anachronistic use of classical pottery underscores the generic nature of the image, suggesting that the painting’s emotional subject matter transcends specific eras.

Ian Jenkins analyzes Leighton’s creative archeology further in “Frederic Lord Leighton and Greek Vases.” Jenkins demonstrates that the designs of vases in Leighton’s paintings tend to borrow elements from different vases, rarely reproducing specific artifacts exactly. As President of the Royal Academy, Leighton was a trustee of the British Museum, and his library also possessed a number of standard works on archeology. Thus, he could have copied exact pieces, but apparently did not feel it necessary to do so. For Leighton, the subject and composition outranked archeological exactitude, and both the classical and non-classical elements are

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important within the picturesque quality of his settings. Jenkins notes the timeless quality of Leighton’s works, and in the instance of *Lachrymae*, the generic use of Greek pottery underscores the abstract, romantic appeal of the painting.

To give an example, the pot resting on the half column in Leighton’s picture is a *hydria*, a three-handled vase used to carry water, that bears a black-figure fountain-house scene dating from around 510 B.C. The scene also appears on vases in Leighton’s *At the Fountain* (1892) and *Captive Andromache* (c. 1888). Because the central figure in *Captive Andromache* greatly resembles the *Lachrymae* mourner in pose, costume, and temperament, one could use the similar scene to draw a connection between these two women. However, the fountain-house scene does not decorate Andromache’s vase, but rather that of another woman in the painting.

Furthermore, *At the Fountain* bears little resemblance to *Lachrymae* or *Captive Andromache*, except for its classical subject and the presence of the fountain-house scene. This particular scene appears to have no significance other than its classical style, necessary for the painting’s ancient setting and romantic mood.

The formal elements of Leighton’s *Lachrymae* fuse together to create a seamless meditation on grief and death. For instance, Leighton’s color choice sharpens the atmosphere of profound sadness while evoking sensations of touch and sound. The purple and black robes express the woman’s grief, and the thick dark locks piled heavily on her head suggest the blackness of her melancholy thoughts. One senses that the bone-colored marble is cold to the touch, while the silvery-browns and shady greens of the darkening background seem to absorb

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13 Leighton’s art evokes the aesthetic eclecticism seen in the paintings of Albert Moore, who combined Japanese elements with classical ones.
14 Ibid., 604.
15 Ibid., 597, 601, 598.
16 Ibid., 601.
17 Ibid., 598.
18 Ibid.
all sounds indicating the presence of life. The woman’s pale skin suggests lifelessness. In the far background, a brilliant golden sunset struggles to burst forth through the thick forest, while the mourning figure turns her bloodless face away from its bright rays. One senses that its warming light is distant and quickly disappearing, and that the scene grows colder with every passing minute.

On a related note, multiple elements come together to lead the viewer’s eye downward, as if to simulate the heavy sensation of depression. The figure’s head collapses against her right arm, as if too heavy to hold up, while her right arm and hand rest listlessly over the edge of the marble slab. Her left arm hangs down by her side like a dead weight. The column complements the stiff form of the woman while its fluted lines lead the viewer’s eye down to the overturned pot and dead leaves on the ground. In addition, the twisted form of the cypress tree directly behind her head echoes her pose, while the heavy knotted branches suggest the burdens of anxiety and inner turmoil. Finally, the horizontals of the low marble wall and square slabs balance the picture and fix the verticals to the ground.

The classical frame (Figure 2.2) that Leighton selected for this painting interacts with both the subject matter and the composition in a fascinating way. Not only do the golden ionic columns underscore the Classicism of the piece, they also reinforce the formal theme of verticality. The stately columns offer visual counterweights to the composition’s downward sinking, as if to suggest that the melancholy widow must force herself to stay upright in her battle against depression. They also mimic classicized Victorian funerary monuments, emphasizing the painting as a tribute to mourning and the memory of lost loved ones. Finally, the frame’s resemblance to an open doorway suggests the passage from a world of life and happiness to a world of death and sadness. Leighton used similar frames for other works, such as

19 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Frederic Leighton: Lachrymae (Mary Lloyd) (96.28).”
as Clytie, suggesting that he may have seen the frame design as merely decorative. Even so, any artistic intention (or lack thereof) does not lessen the frame’s harmonious relationship with the painting, nor does it dull the image’s poetic effect on the viewer.

Throughout Leighton’s career, he painted a number of similar vertical compositions featuring a single female figure. His long exploration of this theme demonstrates his enduring interest in the expressive and allegorical potentials of the female body. Lachrymae shares this category with such works as Electra at the Tomb of Agamemnon (c. 1869), Nausicaa (c. 1878), The Last Watch of Hero (c. 1887), Solitude (c. 1890), and Bath of Psyche (c. 1890). These pictures all primarily concentrate on the central female figure, all of which also either serve as allegories or symbolize philosophical or psychological concepts. The prevalence of allegory in these compositionally similar works places Lachrymae in context while serving to underscore its own allegorical meaning. The artist’s careful consideration of composition, line quality, color, and emotional themes in these earlier works shows their importance to the artist while shedding light on how these rudiments developed into their mature realization in Lachrymae.

The two paintings most similar to Lachrymae, Electra at the Tomb of Agamemnon and The Last Watch of Hero both deal explicitly with the theme of death. In the former painting, Electra grieves at the tomb of her murdered father. In the latter, the priestess Hero desperately searches for her lover Leander, who drowns in the ocean; Hero commits suicide when learning of Leander’s fate. Electra at the Tomb of Agamemnon shares many qualities with Lachrymae: the central, dark-clad female mourner, the funerary stele, and the surrounding classical environment. However, the major difference is its narrative focus: here, the mourning woman has a name and a story. Events have occurred before this scene and more will occur afterwards. Electra’s pose also complements the scene as a narrative episode: because she actively gestures upwards, she
demonstrates that she is a character in her own right who can act according to her own personality and agency. The passivity of the figure in *Lachrymae* allows her to become a receptacle for the image’s allegorical meaning. And yet, without the title *Electra at the Tomb of Agamemnon*, there is little within in the earlier painting to identify the scene. Therefore, this painting demonstrates that Leighton is already moving towards classical interpretations of abstract ideas.

Markedly more dramatic than most of Leighton’s paintings, *The Last Watch of Hero* (Figure 2.3) focuses on the female figure’s extreme angst. Her stiff, muscular body latches onto the open window, her hand anxiously grasps the black curtain, and her face registers a foreboding fear, culminating in the fevered gleam of her eyes. Her black shawl and the dark curtain surround her like a whirlpool, as if foreshadowing the drowning of her lover. Although Hero’s last watch may be the painting’s ostensible subject, the painting’s true subject is the pain and suffering of a despairing woman.

*Nausicaa* is a painting both engaged in and divorced from its original narrative. The painting’s title is the only clue that identifies the figure as a character from Homer’s *Odyssey*. Leighton could just as easily have titled the painting something along the lines of *Curious Young Girl* or *Shy Greek Woman* and the overall effect would have been the same. In the picture, the figure holds her arms in a self-contained gesture of timid modesty. She lingers reluctantly behind as she steps through the doorway. Her darker shirt appears to push her torso slightly back into the picture plane, while her bright white skirt emphasizes her step into the foreground, presumably to meet Odysseus. Leighton thus uses a classical character to embody an emotional state.

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20 I am not making the claim that all personifications are passive; however, in this instance, the figure’s passivity allows her to become an empty vessel onto which an allegory is projected.
Solitude (Figure 2.4) shares the melancholy calm of Lachrymae, without the raw pain of grief. In this painting, an anonymous woman sits on a lonely rock. Her gesture is brooding and self-contained, indicating the interiority of her thoughts and emotions. The gold draperies balance the woman’s peach skin, while her bright white gown keeps the viewer’s eye firmly focused on the solitary figure. The background is a rocky, non-descript, abstracted landscape. It is unclear exactly where the solitary figure sits, but the anonymity of the surrounding landscape matches the painting’s theme perfectly. Where the pensive woman sits is not important: what matters is that she is completely alone in an undisclosed and indeed, unidentifiable, location. Setting, pose, and costume all come together to form an allegory of isolation.

Bath of Psyche (Figure 2.5) depicts the model and actress Dorothy Deen posing as Cupid’s mortal lover. Like many of Leighton’s mythological pictures, the work depicts a quiet, inconsequential scene only loosely connected to its classical narrative. Although the painting may seem like a mere frothy academic figure study, when compared with Lachrymae, one notices an interesting duality. The two works share the same vertical, single-figure format, yet are otherwise formal and thematic opposites. While Lachrymae meditates on death and grief, the Bath of Psyche focuses on beauty and love. The two pieces can be seen as pendants, for viewing the works in relation to one another highlights the distinct emotional themes of each.

The contrasting elements of these two paintings seem so exact as to be planned. In Lachrymae, the head and arms of the dark-haired woman hang down, directing the eye to the bottom of the picture. In Bath of Psyche, the bright red-haired girl holds her arms and head up, gesturing towards the bright blue sky; her tilted head then brings the eye back down through the middle of the picture plane, emphasizing her perfect body. The color scheme of one consists of cool blacks, purples, grays, and browns, while the other revels in warm whites, gold, pink, and

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bronze. Furthermore, the figure in *Lachrymae* remains self-contained, while Psyche is extroverted; while the mourner wears thick layers of black and purple drapery, Psyche removes her white and gold garments to reveal her nude body to the viewer. The settings also distinguish each picture. *Lachrymae* takes place outside in a thick, darkening wood, while Psyche stands in a bright sunny, interior, surrounded by golden tones and creamy white marble. In addition, the eyes of the tortured mourner are closed, demonstrating that her thoughts are kept inwards, while those of the calm Psyche are open and distracted as she muses on her own reflection. Perhaps most significantly, however, *Lachrymae* focuses on the woman’s internal emotional state, while *Bath of Psyche* emphasizes the figure’s physical beauty. These formal differences underscore the overall themes of each picture: beauty, love, and life in the one, and pain, grief, and death in the other.

The previous chapter analyzed Leighton’s connections to Hegelian aesthetics, arguing that his combination of the Classic and the Romantic both utilized and violated that system, therefore creating a body of work emphatically outside of a linear path of development. If that argument can be used to underscore Leighton’s *The Garden of the Hesperides* as an allegory of timelessness and eternity, then can one not use the same argument against *Lachrymae* as an allegory of death, of a temporal end? Not so, for the image contains too many traditional symbols of death and mourning for the meaning to be misinterpreted. However, the unique position that Leighton’s work occupies outside of the line of Hegelian aesthetic development actually infuses another layer of meaning into the work. Death is the natural conclusion to life, and the world continues to function long after its heroes are dead. In the painting, the widow lives on, the cypress trees continue to grow, the wilted wreath is replaced by a fresh one, and the setting sun will rise again. Although a potent allegory of death, *Lachrymae* thus hints at the
theme of regeneration, an idea central to Leighton’s *Flaming June*, which will be analyzed in the next chapter.

In conclusion, Leighton’s *Lachrymae* functions as a classical allegory of death, both symbolically and emotionally. And yet its emphasis on the natural cycle of life hints that death, while an end to an individual’s experience, is not the final end of experience itself. Although death may be saddening, frightening, and inescapable, it is nevertheless the natural conclusion to life. Through symbolism, composition, and artistic context, Leighton’s harmonious formal arrangement of colors and forms softly sings praises to death’s melancholy beauty.
Figure 2.1: Frederic Leighton, *Lachrymae*, c. 1894-95, Source: Artstor
Figure 2.2: Frederic Leighton, *Lachrymae* (framed), 1895-96, Source: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/96.28
Figure 2.3: Frederic Leighton, *The Last Watch of Hero*, c. 1887, Source: Artstor
Figure 2.4: Frederic Leighton, Solitude, c. 1890, Source: Artstor
3 FLAMING JUNE: AN ALLEGORY OF REGENERATION

Frederic Leighton’s ubiquitous Flaming June (Figure 3.1) is familiar to many through book covers, book plates, posters, tote bags, bookmarks, and other types of museum merchandise. Indeed, Christopher Wood has issued the ominous warning that the picture may become the Mona Lisa of Victorian art. The painting’s frequent reproduction, perhaps owing to its brilliant color and unique composition, may tempt the art historian to dismiss its scholarly importance. Yet beneath the image’s pop culture stardom lies deeper meanings. According to Christopher Newall, “Flaming June celebrates the continuity and regeneration of youthful beauty…” To analyze this idea more closely, one must consider the painting itself as well as its relationship to other works by Leighton. Whereas The Garden of the Hesperides and Lachrymae serve as allegories of timelessness and death, respectively, Flaming June comments visually on another experiential approach to time: regeneration.

Although human beings may fantasize about immortality and timelessness, and while all persons must eventually come to terms with the finality of death, the theme of regeneration offers an alternate approach to these temporal absolutes. Regeneration consists of both extremes: to regenerate, someone or something must first die and then be reborn, only to die again as part of the eternally-renewing cycle of nature. Within the painting, multiple elements coalesce to emphasize positive notions of life, light, and balance, while contrasting elements call to mind negative visions of death, darkness, and strife. Kenneth Bendiner suggests that the painting’s contradictory allusions to both life and death suggest that the world is unknowable, that the work is “an evocative mystery filled with uncertain meanings … Flaming June is a haunting work

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where all is implied and nothing clearly stated.” On the contrary, I would like to suggest that this thematic paradox communicates a clear message. Through its careful formal arrangement, subtle iconography, corporeal symbolism, relationships to Leighton’s oeuvre considered as a whole, and the significance of sleep, *Flaming June* presents an allegory of regeneration: the paradox of simultaneous life and death.

Leighton certainly chose a unique composition for *Flaming June*. The square format itself is unusual within Leighton’s work, and the pose of the central figure is even more unconventional. According to Elizabeth Prettejohn:

> The basic idea would seem to be a recipe for ungainliness: an oversized thigh dominates, placed square across the centre of the canvas and usurping a significant proportion of the surface area; behind it the rest of the figure recedes abruptly in relentless foreshortening. Nonetheless, Leighton’s superlative skill in the manipulation of bodily forms, refined over a lifetime of figure painting, eliminates all awkwardness and tension, producing an image that epitomizes the delicious languour of the body in summer heat.

As Prettejohn notes, the figure’s large, foreshortened thigh commands immediate attention. Although the painting’s format is square, the sturdy thigh grounds the composition, emphasizing the image’s predominant horizontality. This massive, central horizontal draws attention to other horizontals within the composition: the marble floor, the draped bench, the low wall, the blinding strip of glittering sea, the hazy sky, and the patterned canopy.

The predominance of horizontals meshes well with the overall theme of unguarded, languorous sleep. However, diagonals disrupt the midsummer afternoon, introducing a peculiar note of anxiety into an otherwise tranquil scene. If the image’s horizontals can be seen to represent positive aspects of tranquility, rest, and balance, then the intruding diagonals represent tension, conflict, and discord. Perhaps most noticeably, the bright red pole beside the clump of

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3 Ibid., 142.
4 Ibid., 125.
oleander slashes through the uppermost right corner. Just as the central horizontal of the model’s right thigh highlights the supporting horizontals within the composition, so does this diagonal draw attention to other diagonals within the image. The woman’s sunlit right arm and the subtle curve of her reclining back both mimic the basic thrust of the red pole. Opposing diagonals, such as the woman’s left arm, bent left leg, and right lower leg, effectively balance the composition while retaining the note of subtle anxiety.

In addition to demonstrating a delicate balance of horizontals and diagonals, the coiled pose also expresses compactness. Supposedly, the idea for the design originally came from the casual pose adopted by a tired model; however, multiple drawings and figure studies demonstrate how Leighton refined the original pose into a more harmonious arrangement. Michelangelo’s Night (c. 1530) in the Medici Chapel is also frequently cited as a possible source, as is G.F. Watt’s enigmatic painting Hope (1886). Both of these images feature a single, sightless female figure compressed into a dense, self-contained pose. According to the Ormonds, “One feels that the figure [in Flaming June] has been forced into conformity with a pre-existing circular pattern, but amazingly the effect remains relaxed and luxuriant” (italics mine). The slumped, compacted pose is not significant simply because it is odd, or compositionally balanced, or because one can easily identify possible sources. It is significant because it too embraces a formal paradox. As Bendiner notes, the form appears relaxed, yet it is actually painfully twisted. Indeed, Leighton’s knotted and condensed sitter remains curiously languid and relaxed.

As in so many of Leighton’s paintings, color plays a key role within Flaming June, most notably that of the vivid orange drapery. Leighton’s own contemporaries failed to agree on the

exact shade of this vibrant hue. According to the Art Journal, the robe was “yellow, a topaz which evades all attempt at description.” Leighton’s biographer John Edgcumbe Staley described it as “the shade of a pale Malta orange or a golden apricot,” and F.G. Stephens saw it as a “pale, rosy orange.” Perhaps this difficulty lay in the fact that the garment is not really one color: the fabric’s color morphs seamlessly from a sunny yellow to bright orange to deep, sweltering shades of red-gold. Comparisons to flame are inevitable and plentiful. Newall refers to the garment as “molten lava” and “a living flame,” the Ormonds describe the color scheme as “feverish,” and Keren Hammerschlag notes that the woman appears to emit heat as if she were the June sun itself.

Indeed, the vivid apricot-colored fabric, the glowing flesh tones, the blood-red oleander, and the warm, golden-brown draperies immediately confront the senses with notions of heat. When considering the woman’s flushed cheeks, the blinding ocean, and the hazy air resplendent with reflected sunlight, the viewer has little need of the painting’s title to guess the season or the temperature. The sleeping figure and the ocean surface seem to dominate the picture plane by virtue of their hot brightness. As the eye travels from the picture’s glowing center to its perimeters, one even notices a drop in color temperature. For example, the edges of the sky and ocean cool to their conventional blue, the oleander leaves revert to deep green, and the surrounding marble tiles and drapery recede into soft shadows. The richly colored central figure dominates the picture plane in such a way that one wonders whether the title refers to a mere season or to a woman named June dressed in fiery draperies.

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9 Quoted in Ormond, “Flaming June,” 124.
10 Newall, The Art of Lord Leighton, 137.
The intense orange hue relates to the subject matter in a curious way: one normally associates cooler and softer colors with ideas of rest and tranquility, while hot colors invoke passion and action. Yet here, a fiery palette colors a scene of total repose. Again, as with the contrasting horizontals and diagonals, the picture appears to embrace a sense of discord. The striking and incongruous color turns an image of a languid, slumbering woman, otherwise utterly passive and object-like, into a blazing mass of undulating orange tones. Furthermore, the rippling fabric creates innumerable additional lines that also contrast with the model’s absolute passivity.13 Again, we encounter the paradox of simultaneous stillness and movement, rest and motion, and perhaps even death and life.

Although Leighton’s painting may appear relatively simple or even decorative at first glance, the composition actually brims with compelling iconography. One of the most important symbols is the woman herself, who personifies the summer season and conceivably even the sun itself.14 The central figure is round, bright, and fiery; her radiating orange draperies act as heat waves.15 After all, the sun itself is a wonderful symbol of regeneration. Not only is the sun both life-giving and deadly, but it also appears to go through cycles that complement the human cycle of life, death, and rebirth. The sun rises and sets, always to rise again. The sun grows paler and more distant during the cold winter months, only to return to its former glory in the heat of summer. Leighton had previously alluded to this theme of yearly renewal in works such as The Return of Persephone (1891), where the pallid goddess of spring emerges from the underworld into the arms of her mother, the earth goddess Demeter. Here, the dark, sunless realm of Hades clearly signifies death, while the bright, warm world above symbolizes life and rebirth.

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14 Bendiner, An Introduction to Victorian Painting, 142.
15 Ibid.
Leighton’s depictions of sunlight are not always wholly positive. For example, in *Daedalus and Icarus* (1869), the sun possesses both good and bad qualities. Here, the bright Mediterranean sunlight is associated with ideal human beauty as it illuminates the Apollo-like body of the young Icarus. However, the indiscriminate sun also brings death, for the viewer knows that its heat will later melt the wax bindings of Icarus’s wings and send him plunging into the sea. Although one can argue that it was the youth’s own carelessness that directly led to his demise, the sun was no doubt a conspirator in his death.

In his early version of *Clytie* (1890-92), Leighton perhaps fully expresses the dramatic power of sunlight. In this large-scale landscape, the tiny figure of Clytie, tucked away in the lower right-hand corner, lifts her arms to the golden sky of billowing, sunlit clouds. Although the painting takes its title from the lovelorn nymph, Clytie herself is difficult to locate within the composition. While the golden sky glows with divine light, the small, unfortunate nymph rests in shadow on the earth; this contrast seems to emphasize her distance from the god she loves who does not love her in return. Here, Leighton depicts the sunlight as beautiful, golden, and yet distant. While Apollo eventually takes pity on the sad Clytie and changes her into a sunflower, so that she can always follow his movements across the sky, her love nevertheless remains unrequited for eternity.

The tale of Clytie must have greatly appealed to Leighton, who painted a second version of the myth few years later (Figure 3.2). In the later *Clytie*, left unfinished at Leighton’s death, the composition magnifies the nymph as she worships Apollo. According to Newall, “Leighton saw Apollo first and foremost as the symbol of the energizing power of light, and as he was himself without conventional religious faith, it is no exaggeration to say that Leighton regarded

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the sun as the vital elemental force and a fitting object of worship.”¹⁷ Yet, Leighton chooses a bittersweet myth marred by unrequited love as his final aesthetic hymn to the sun. Based on the subject choices of *Daedalus and Icarus* and the two versions of *Clytie*, Leighton seems to have viewed the sun as a symbol of the simultaneous beauty and heartlessness of nature.

The androgynous elements and anonymity of Leighton’s figure suggest its role as a universal, allegorical human figure. Like many of Leighton’s figures, the woman depicted here has no real identity: the viewer knows neither her name, nor her backstory, nor her historical era. Like so many of Leighton’s works, *Flaming June* uses the human figure to express an abstract idea. Like Michelangelo, Leighton made some studies for the figure from a male model,¹⁸ no doubt accounting for the muscular arms, thick neck, and large frame. While Leighton’s figure certainly reads as female, as is appropriate to a nineteenth-century allegory, the masculine elements suggest an androgynous, universal human figure. This universality underscores the philosophical import of the work, suggesting that the painting expresses a condition applicable to human beings from all times and places, both male and female. For although all humans die, others are born to take their places, and the wheel of nature continues to turn amidst death and decay.

The painting’s other link to Michelangelo also holds special meaning. As stated above, the pose of the central figure greatly resembles that of Michelangelo’s *Night* (Figure 3.3), a work that Leighton considered among the highest achievements of Western art. *Night* adorns the Medici Chapel, which commemorates two family members who died young.¹⁹ *Flaming June* shares the same heavy features, large frame, massive thigh, closed eyes, and self-contained

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¹⁹ Ibid., 128.
posture as *Night*. Leighton’s figure therefore carries with it associations of night, death, and the allegorical commemoration of loss. To further complicate matters, Leighton uses the visual quotation of *Night* to illustrate a scene in broad daylight. This ostensibly incompatible pairing actually underscores the cyclical and regenerative meaning of *Flaming June*. Night is the pendant to day; without one, the other cannot exist. In the same manner, death is the pendant to life, and each concept gives meaning to the other.

In addition to *Flaming June*’s figurative symbolism, the painting also embraces floral iconography. Leighton was no stranger to plant symbolism. For example, the laurel in both *Lachrymae* and the large processional piece *The Daphnephoria* (1876) signifies Apollo and immortality, the cypress in *Lachrymae* symbolizes death, and the rose bush in *Venus Disrobing for the Bath* (c. 1867) alludes to that goddess. It is not farfetched, therefore, to suggest that the oleander branch in *Flaming June* also holds special meaning. Although beautiful, the oleander plant is poisonous, and its presence strikes a menacing chord within the lush symphony of orange and gold. It is possible that the beautiful pink oleander serves merely a decorative or compositional function; however, it seems strange that Leighton would choose a toxic plant for such an innocuous purpose in place of a more salubrious bloom.

Another important, although easily overlooked, symbol in *Flaming June* is the ocean. Like the sun, water is both necessary for life and a deadly force of nature. Leighton alludes to the deadly powers of the ocean in several paintings throughout his career. In an early mythological piece, *The Fisherman and the Syren—*from a Ballad by Goethe* (1856-58), a dying fisherman collapses against a rock as the fish-tailed siren leaps from the waves and clasps her arms around his neck. Her pale skin becomes an extension of the froth from which she emerges.

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20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 126.
and her clinging embrace acts as a metaphor for the deadly vise of stormy ocean waves. On a related note, the predella for the *Last Watch of Hero*, which depicts the unfortunate drowned Leander, also alludes to the ocean’s ghastlier nature. Furthermore, in the apocalyptic Biblical work, “And the sea gave up the dead which were in it” (1891-92), sickly resurrected figures rise like corpses from the ocean, depicted as a dark watery tomb set against a stormy sky. In addition, one must not forget that Icarus also met his death in the sea. Although the sea in *Flaming June* glitters with sparkling sunlight, previous examples from Leighton’s *oeuvre* caution the viewer not to forget its deadly power.

Leighton frequently painted in the ocean in the background of his works, particularly in his mythological pieces and non-narrative classical genre works, such as *Actaea, Nymph of the Shore* (c. 1868) and *Winding the Skein* (c. 1878). Are we to assume the ocean holds sinister connotations in these works? Certainly not, for in these calm paintings the ocean is still and peaceful, like a pale-blue ribbon stretched across the composition. In the other works referenced above, the ocean is stormy, dark, menacing, or overtly associated with death. Likewise, the ocean in *Flaming June* can also be read as threatening. Although its surface is calm and flat, the hot sunlight reflects with a cruel, blinding intensity. One contemporary reviewer even referred to the sea as “molten brass.” Yet, at the same time, the edges of the water appear to cool to blue, once again reinforcing the painting’s central theme of paradox.

The significance of water within *Flaming June* does not end with the actual ocean. The central figure’s fiery, meandering folds appear to take on the dynamic flow of water itself. Leighton’s draperies often seem to possess a mind of their own, and *Flaming June* perhaps exhibits this tendency best among the paintings in Leighton’s *oeuvre*. In one of his Royal

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23 Ibid.
Academy notebooks, Leighton wrote the following comment about drapery: “combination of expressed motion and rest source of fascination in drapery—wayward flow & ripple like living water together with absolute repose” (italics mine). One wonders if the artist had Flaming June in mind when recording that thought.

Not only do the fluid patterns within the drapery connect the figure to the background seascape, they also draw a firm connection between the central figure and nature itself. The anonymous central figure, with her rippling draperies, so closely associated with the heat of summer and the Mediterranean atmosphere, becomes a warm body of water within the environment itself. Color and brushwork combine to suggest other elements of nature within the central figure. The organic, undulating lines of the brown draperies suggest earth; the hazy quality produced by the lush, blended brushwork throughout the painting emphasizes air; and the glittering sea and hot orange color suggest fire. Leighton’s image thus combines these four ancient elements into one seamless image. In this way, the central figure refers not only to the sun, or to water, or to the sweltering summer air, but to the constantly regenerating force of nature itself.

In her article, “The Deathly Sleep of Frederic Leighton’s Painted Women,” Keren Hammerschlag proposes an unique interpretation of Leighton’s fluid-like draperies. She argues that, because these elaborate folds often clothe unconscious women, with their uncanny resemblances to corpses, and also because Leighton himself was aware of his own impending mortality, his meandering draperies represent the decomposition of the body after death. While one must be cautious when making biographical links between an artist and his work, it is true that Leighton painted this image the year before his death when he was in poor health. Leighton

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24 Quoted in Ibid.
had suffered his first attack of angina in October, 1894. After a period of illness and frequent subsequent attacks, Leighton died from heart disease on January 25, 1896 at the age of sixty-five. In addition, Leighton’s father had died four years previously, so death was certainly on the artist’s mind in the nineties. It is therefore not completely ungrounded to suggest that the painting could have been influenced by the theme of death, or at least tempered by the idea of human mortality.

Of *Flaming June*, Hammerschlag notes:

… Leighton’s rendering of the drapery makes the sleeping woman look like she is dissolving…to the right of the figure, orange drapery becomes brown, which then becomes dark purple and blue, implying that her form is melting. The brown fabric is made to look like an extension of her hair, which representationally seeps down either side of her body and even beyond the confines of the picture frame. A particularly macabre interpretation would be that the hair-turned-drapery stands in for the continued growth of hair that was believed to occur after death.

In this reading, the once-lovely draperies now take on sinister connotations. They serve as a classical *memento mori*, reminding the viewer that even this sturdy young beauty will one day dissolve into the earth. This ghastly reminder contrasts greatly with the woman’s rosy cheeks, full arms, and peaceful demeanor, further reinforcing the paradox of simultaneous life and death. Furthermore, the metaphor of bodily dissolution strengthens the figure’s identification with the natural world. It demonstrates that the human figure will one day die and decay into the soil, which will then nourish other forms of life in the ever-renewing cycle of nature.

Although some scholars contend that Leighton’s sleeping figures may just as well be dead as alive, one can hardly make that argument for the blossoming young girl in *Flaming

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27 Ibid., 140-45.
June. Her shapely figure, rosy complexion, and the full breast that seems to expand with the deep, slow breath of sleep demonstrate a healthy, living woman. Perhaps the confusion may arise from the fact that Leighton portrays the dreamy, detached world of slumber so poetically. The figure’s twisted posture combined with the vulnerability of unguarded slumber produce anxiety, while the warm color palette and the soft rendering of the woman’s face suggest peace and happiness. Bendiner notes: “Sleep may represent death in Flaming June …. But the sleeping figure … is also filled with life. Her breasts are full, the climate is warm, the sun shines, and the organic ripplings of drapery produce an Art Nouveau pattern of vitality.”

Death-like sleep combines with physical health and lively patterning, sending mixed messages to the viewer.

The theme of sleep is important to both Flaming June and its precedents. Leighton frequently portrayed sleep or unconsciousness, as did many other British artists of the late nineteenth century. Although Leighton did not always introduce overt themes of mortality in his work, a sinister mood invades his paintings of sleeping women. Ariadne (1868), Cymon and Iphigenia (1884), Summer Moon (1872), and Summer Slumber (1894) are among the most notable examples of such images in Leighton’s oeuvre. Analyzing the role of sleep in these images helps to clarify the meaning of sleep within Flaming June.

In Ariadne, the abandoned lover of Theseus lies on the shores of the island of Naxos. Her pale skin and open, gaping mouth suggest profound suffering or death, and the black draperies on which she lies introduce a funereal note. Is she dead, or is she merely exhausted with weeping? The painting’s original extended title also fails to make this clear. In the 1868 exhibition catalogue, Leighton titled the work Ariadne Abandoned by Theseus: Ariadne Watches

31 Bendiner, An Introduction to Victorian Art, 128.
32 Ibid., 130.
33 Ibid., 129.
for His Return: Artemis Releases Her by Death. Which stage the image portrays is not made clear,\textsuperscript{34} and the viewer is left with the mysterious and pathetic form of a victimized figure.

In Cymon and Iphigenia, the narrative context makes it clear that the female figure is sleeping. According to Boccacio’s Decameron (c. 1350), Cymon was an uncivilized young boor who was transfixed and redeemed through the beauty of the sleeping Iphigenia. Although the two young lovers eventually live happily ever after, a dark, brooding mood invades the moonlit pastoral scene.\textsuperscript{35} Cymon embodies a threat; he does not appear to be reformed just yet. His gaze is intense and menacing, and Iphigenia appears as vulnerable and helpless as she is beautiful. Again, we encounter the theme of problematic sleep. The painting sends conflicting emotional messages, for unguarded repose mixes with the possibility of eminent danger.

In Summer Moon, two Michelangelesque figures rest on a bench, leaning against a curved, architectural recess. Pomegranates are scattered throughout the painting, and as that fruit symbolizes the underworld, they could signify death.\textsuperscript{36} Furthermore, the word “moon” in the title refers to night, which is commonly evoked as a metaphor for death. But the evocation of night could just as easily point to themes of rest and sleep. Again, Leighton’s intentions remain unclear, and the painting remains an aestheticized vision of the abstract idea of repose.

The late painting Summer Slumber is one of the most enigmatic of all of Leighton’s works. This non-narrative painting combines symbols of sleep, life, and death into one mysterious image. Here, another anonymous sleeper lies prone on a stone wall, her arm twisted into an unusual, upright gesture. In the background, a mysterious stone statue places her fingers to her lips, as if to hush the viewer. This gesture of silencing becomes morbid when one realizes that the female figure perches dangerously on the edge of a cistern. Does the statue merely ask

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 126.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 129.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 126.
the viewer not to disturb the sleeper, or is the statue warning the viewer not to alert the young woman to the danger of drowning? Another statue sits on a pedestal, clasping an overturned vessel, which could symbolize extinction.\(^{37}\) In the foreground, two bas-reliefs depict figures similar to the woman in *Flaming June*, as if to reinforce the theme of sleep. Furthermore, the painting’s horizontal composition, which complements the main figure’s prone body, reinforces the theme of unconsciousness and rest. The painting seems to demonstrate that sleep serves as a metaphor for death or mortality. However, pigeons and roses, which certainly do not symbolize death, also decorate the scene.\(^{38}\) Again, Leighton avoids a definitive meaning.

While sleep can be read as a metaphor for death, its significance in Leighton’s works is never truly clear, and in *Flaming June* its meaning is equally complex. The figure does not appear to be dead, yet she is profoundly unconscious and paired with deathlike symbolism. However, the initial impression of life and youth outweigh the suggestions of mortality. Therefore here, like in so many other aspects of Leighton’s painting, one can argue that sleep alludes to ideas of renewal and regeneration. Sleep may resemble death, but the sleeper always awakes, refreshed and rejuvenated; sleep therefore serves as a microcosm of death and rebirth.

In conclusion, due to the painting’s complex formal arrangement, iconography, corporeal symbolism, and significance in relation to other works depicting the theme of sleep, Leighton’s *Flaming June* represents an allegory of regeneration. This unique canvas combines death and life into one seamless meditation on eternal rebirth. While *The Garden of the Hesperides* explores the fiction of everlasting life and *Lachrymae* reflects on the termination of experience that is death, *Flaming June* combines these ideas into the concept of eternal death and rebirth.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 129.
\(^{38}\) Ibid.
Figure 3.1: Frederic Leighton, *Flaming June*, 1895, Source: Artstor

Figure 3.3: Michelangelo, *Night, Medici Tomb*, c. 1530, Source: Kenneth Bendiner, *An Introduction to Victorian Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 129.
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Frederic Leighton’s late paintings evoke abstract ideas and allegory rather than morals or specific stories. Through their complex use of iconography, expert formal configuration, and relationships to other key works within Leighton’s oeuvre, *The Garden of the Hesperides*, *Lachrymae*, and *Flaming June* represent allegories of timelessness, death, and regeneration. In the future, I would like to explore further avenues of research related to Leighton’s treatment of female allegory in relation to both the Academic tradition as a whole and the visual conventions of the Victorian era.

During the 1890’s, Leighton himself was in declining health, and one wonders if the pictures executed during this period constitute personal musings on the nature of time and existence. While the possibility exists, one cannot determine whether the paintings are biographical in nature, or whether the artist’s motivations lay elsewhere. Whether or not they are biographical, they still remain as poetic and expressive musings on life, death, and rebirth at the close of the artist’s life, the century, and the Victorian period as a whole.
REFERENCES


