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**Abstract**
Analysis of the character of the maiden in *The Wood Beyond the World*. Notes that as a woman both chaste and possessed of wizardly powers—like her decidedly unchaste counterpart, the Mistress—she engenders a degree of tension and uncertainty until the end of the novel. Sees Morris's attitudes toward sex and society in terms of his Victorian background.

**Additional Keywords**
Morris, William—Characters—The Maiden; Morris, William. The Wood Beyond the World; Sex in literature; Victorian Literature; John Pivovarnick; Valerie Protopapas
William Morris's *The Wood Beyond The World*: The Victorian World vs. The Mythic Eternities

by Clarence Wolffshohl

Chaucer's Wife of Bath tells a story about a knight who is compelled to marry a wretched hag who changes into a beautiful woman once she has gained control of him. The tale's plot is part of folk tradition which has a variety of such hag-to-beauty metamorphoses. Tension generally characterizes these folk tales or literary recreations, caused by the narrator's suspenseful playing with the old plot; but the audience suspects the old hag will become a young darling because that is the way fairy tales go. I was equally certain that the young darling in William Morris' *The Wood Beyond the World* was going to transform herself into an old hag because that is the way the absurd world goes. However, Morris lived in a different world — a Victorian world; thus, he only teased me with his suspiciously young beauty, but his teasing suggests the depths of his vision in the fantasy and the direction of his thoughts in his world. Morris was a product of the Victorian society and world view; and no wonder, he was trapped by the Victorian strict-jacket of often blind optimism. He returned to the frenetic Dionysian wood beyond the (Victorian) world, but Apollo's discipline — the Victorian horror of their Romantic predecessors' alarming imagination — forced him to return to the world of law and order.

Morris' young maiden becomes symbolic of that world, adding to its allure with her pseudo-supernatural powers that make her more a votary of Apollo than of Dionysus. Her powers are for order and she remains chaste and pure because of them, but they often tend to be suspect of dark deeds in both Walter's (the hero's) mind and my mind, and that is where the tension originates. The reader recognizes the maiden's powers only through Walter's eyes, but that reader must feel as uneasy about the maiden as Walter often does. The fantasy, therefore, gives the reader the feeling of tension, much of which is created by the struggle between the mythic eternities of Apollo and Dionysus or the Victorian world of order and the subconscious world of abandon. And Walter, Morris, and we are caught in the middle.

Before we explore the struggle and its various ramifications in Morris' romance, what Lin Carter has called the first of the great fantasy novels, a synopsis of the story may be helpful. The hero, high Golden Walter, determines to leave his home of Langton on Holm on his father's business because his marriage has soured. Before his ship sails, he has a vision on the quay of a dwarf, a maiden, and a Lady. Unable to understand the vision, Walter sets out, but on the journey he receives word that his father has died at the hands of his wife's kin. Returning to Langton, the ship is driven far off course by a storm, and it finally lands in strange territory.

The only inhabitant of the land, as far as the ship's crew can tell, is an old man who lives a pure, simple, and natural existence. Walter explores this peaceful realm and discovers a pass in the mountains that block the passage inland. He thus decides to leave his comrades and journey through the shire where finally he discovers a paradisical wood. This wood has four inhabitants — a dwarf, a fair young maiden, a mysterious Lady, and a king's son.

Walter first encounters the animalistic dwarf whose ominous statements about the maiden and the lady start the tension. Next, Walter meets the maiden with whom he falls in love, but she also makes ominous and strange statements about the seemingly perverted garden and its inhabitants, including herself. Finally, Walter meets the third part of his earlier vision — the dark Lady who resides in a hall that is reminiscent of a Palace of Lust in the manner of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. The fourth person in this exotic realm is the King's Son who seemed the lover of the Mistress of the land.

Walter's stay in the wood is a mixture of sexual delight (with the Lady) and intrigues to escape the Lady's magic (with the Maiden who has mysteriously forbidden him to touch her). The magic of the Mistress keeps Walter in check until the Maiden reveals some wizardry of her own. Walter and the Maiden flee the golden house of the Wizardress, after the Maiden kills the King's Son which causes the Lady to commit suicide.

During their flight from the wood, Walter and the Maiden encounter the Bear people who worship the Lady as a deity. Their land is drought-stricken, so they look to Walter and the Maiden as deities to relieve the condition and clearly expect results. The Maiden declares her godhead before the assembled Bear people and convinces them by her magic that she is capable of and will bring rain to the land. She also convinces them to let her and Walter go to the mountains to the south where the two are parted in a storm, thus passing out of the fantastic land separately.

Not long afterwards, they come together and move down the mountains where they are met by a group of people from Starwall who have awaited, according to their custom, the coming of the new king from the mountains. Walter is made king and rules the city triumphantly with the Maiden as his Queen, sans her magic powers. Therefore, the fantasy ends resplendent with what Northrop Frye would class as an archetypal comic vision resolution, but the story is not always clear concerning its outcome.

The fantasy's hero Walter is a classic Everyman. He is all of us who wish to escape the narrow confines of our world of commerce and rules, the latter being generally created to further those involved most in the former. Also, Walter is a storehouse for the full range of emotions, attitudes, and desire; or I might say that all the natures of the other characters are reflected in Walter. In action he is mostly pure and true, being the white half of the whole to which the King's Son is the darker, more bacchic half. Walter desires to lie with both the Maiden and her Mistress, but his wishes are generally suppressed or controlled while the King's Son parades his lust openly and often perversely. An interesting point is that Walter began his quest, his escape from his home, because of the sexual frustrations of his marriage as well as on a business journey for his father's house. Some profitable psychological tinkering with Morris' own life could be based on *The Wood Beyond the World*, but I will leave that to others.
However, the unfulfilled Walter should give us a clue early in the work that he is questing into the world of his sexual desires as much as into a geographical area. And the geography even reflects Walter’s desires. He sunders himself from his men by passing through a shard in the cliff, which is described by Morris as follows:

It was in sooth a downright breach or cleft in the rock-wall, and there was no hill or bent leading up to it, nothing but a tumble of stones before it, which was somewhat uneasy going, yet needed naught by labor to overcome it, and when he had got over this, and was in the very pass itself, he found it no ill going; forsooth at first it was little worse than a rough road between two great stony slopes, though a little trickle of water ran down amidst it. So, though it was so high nightfall, yet Walter pressed on, yea, and long after the very night was come. For the moon rose and bright a little after nightfall. But at last he had gone so long, and was so weary, that he deemed it naught but wisdom to rest him, and so lay down on a piece of greensward between the stones, when he had eaten a morsel out of his satchel, and drunk of the water of the stream. There as he lay, if he had any doubt of peril, his weariness soon made it all one to him, for presently he was asleep as soundly as any man in Langton on Holn.

This is an entrance into the womb, a topographical intercourse that gives him entry into a sexual wilderness paradise or that fulfills his wishes. When he passes through the shard, he enters into a realm more faithful to Dionysus than Apollo, or more faithful to the id and ego than the superego. The first contact in the Wood is with the aspish dwarf who is lustful, spiteful, and perhaps cannibalistic. The yellow-coated dwarf introduces Walter to the conflict between the Maiden and her Mistress.

One thing I wish to interject here to prevent possible misunderstanding. Morris is not moralistic. Sexual desire and fulfillment are positive forces in Morris’ vision. Both the lyrical moments of love between the Maiden and Walter and the passionate lustiness between the Mistress and Walter are vital forces; these Dionysian moments are positive alternatives to the mechanized, commercial world of Victorian England. When one of them at play, he is open and free. But Morris surely saw natural lines of selecting the better alternative, and he chose that closer to the idealized union. Walter enters into the fantasy realm, into our mythic root system, to find the key to the right alternative. He finds the key in the fantasy union with the Maiden — a union of chastity which seems to symbolize the social union needed of men, a union in contrast to his faulty first marriage in reality and the more sinister dalliance with the dark Mistress. Walter delights in the House of Pleasance with the Mistress, but he gives his love to the Maiden. Dionysian pleasure with Apollonian light.

Walter continues his search in the wood when the dwarf leaves him, and he next encounters the Maiden — “a shame-fast maiden.” Immediately, questions concerning her nature arise. She divines that he has already set his heart on her — the visions that compelled Walter to the Wood. Then she forbids him to touch her body.

...yea, that I may touch thy body in some wise? She looked on him steadily, and said softly: Nay, this above all things must not be; and that it may not be a part of the evil which entangles us.

If we believed that Morris was a Victorian moralist, we might see the passage as a warning against sexual openness and the whole chapter (Chapter X: Walter Happeneth on Another Creature in the Strange Land) as a Victorian version of a perverted Garden of Eden. But we know that Morris had rejected the stifling Victorian restrictions toward sexuality; thus, the “wilderness fruitful of evil” intensifies any misgivings about the Maiden. Not long afterwards the Maiden admits that she as well as her Mistress are wise in wizardry and that she herself is a “gulleful creature. A particular branch of that wizardry involves changing the aspect of folk so utterly that they seem other than they verily are.” If the Maiden can change a prince into a frog, why not change her own Hag self into a beauty. Wondering about the Maiden’s true identity develops the tension that surrounds her throughout the fantasy.

Perhaps the incident that most generates the tension is when the Maiden tells Walter that her wisdom — her particular charm in the early part of the fantasy — will be lost with her maidenhead. They key to the Maiden’s strength — and perhaps her spells — is her virginity. Whereas the Mistress gratified her sexual wishes and maintained her wisdom or wizardry, the Maiden’s wizardry is “the wisdom of a wise maid, and not of a woman.”

Walter has doubts about the Maiden periodically. When they are accidentally parted during the storm on the mountain after they leave the Bear people, Walter thinks that “The Maid was of the fays” and “he began to fear that she had but won his love to leave him and forget him for a newcomer after the want of fay-women, as old wives tell.” It is inviting to note that Walter leaves the wood and enters into his original reality without the Maiden and through a narrow mountain pass. As discussed earlier, the geography reflects certain sexual undertones, and this withdrawal from the Wood and its Golden House and Bower of Pleasance — free sexual play — without the Maiden as he entered without her suggests an intercourse during which Dionysian passions run free. Of course, he soon rediscovers the Maid, becomes king of Stark-wall, and lives successfully and happily thereafter in married bliss with the dematerialized Maiden, which would suggest that the Maiden’s body was enjoyed by Walter and that the plunge into the Wood’s passionate wilderness was but sexual foreplay. And after all, wasn’t it really the Maiden whom Walter loved and truly desired, and he did not even touch her in the Wood.

Or is there some connection between the Mistress and the Maiden which binds the two characters together as one. The Mistress is a temptress, sensual and seductive. She is nearly a stereotype of the sexually wanton enchantress. She is Experience, whereas the Maiden is Innocence, a parallel to the King’s Son — Walter dichotomy. But several points of view are as similar as creatures. Both are wise in wizardry, but the Maiden of chaste virginial wisdom is a thrill to the Mistress, the sorceress of experience, in the Dionysian Wood beyond the World. If we consider the two women or forces as halves of a whole, Morris’ theme is an interesting one, some archetypal symbolic characteristics. The Maiden says of her Mistress:

I serve an evil mistress, of whom I may say that scarce I wot if she be a woman or not; but by some creature is she accounted for a god, and as a god is herded; and surely never god was crueler nor colder than she.

And curiously she says to Walter:

...she is wise in wizardry (even as some deal as I), and went thou to touch me with hand or mouth on my naked flesh, yea, or were it even my raiment, then would she scent the savour of thy love upon me, and then, though it may be she would spare thee, she would not spare me.

...so fulfilled is she with malice and spite, that even then she may turn round on me to punish me for doing that which she would have me do.

These passages suggest an identity between the two women, with the Dionysian nature dominating the Apollonian nature in the sensual wilderness, human passion overcoming human reason. The situation is a Jekyll and Hyde duality, and one may consider the number of works dealing with similar psychic duality that appeared in this era, such as Stevenson’s novel or Wilde’s Dorian Gray.
In the Victorian England, as in most of society today, women suppressed their sexual drives even more than men, but they were human and had desires. Morris (though he never married) described the carnal drive of the Mistress; this was the inner woman freed of inhibitions and open to a man’s love. When Walter and the Mistress make love in the Bower of Pleasance, Morris softly describes it as follows:

So they wandered here and there through the waning of the day, and then entered at last into the cool dark house, then they loved and played together, as if the pair of lovers guiltless, with no fear for the morrow, and no seeds of emnity and death soon betwixt them.

At the same time Morris, as his fellow Pre-Raphaelites (at least, in literature), preferred innocent love over that tainted by knowledge: Rossetti’s Jenny and Swinburne’s Dolores reject ladies of experience and Morris’ Maiden escapes her Mistress. The sexual drive is just as strong and as beautiful, but it is controlled (not suppressed) by innocence and reason (not prudery).

Perhaps this is another key to the tension felt about the Maiden. We are accustomed in Victorian literature to accept a heroine who is either pure (such as Dicken’s Esther Summerson in Bleak House) or infernal (Thackeray’s Becky). Morris wanted neither, choosing an alternative of a Maiden innocent and chaste yet healthily desirous. In a way Morris’ fantasy presents a more realistic character than some of the “realistic” novels of the century. However, the Maiden is more than a part of the psychic-emotional whole or a representative of Morris’ ideal womanhood.

She is the meeting ground for Imaginative forces that exist outside Time and Space and satirical thrusts aimed at Victorian society. Herein lies some of the tension. The Imaginative or mythic forces which control the fantasy’s actions generally run counter to what Morris chooses to attack in his satirical moments, but at times the mythic level of the work condones and psychologically necessitates the events which reflect a faulty Victorian society.

The central mythic element is Walter’s quest, as the quest is the most predominant feature in fantasy and romance. Walter’s quest is an aimless one in many ways, reflecting the aimless quest of modern man or Victorian man in a moral-material wasteland. He is led vaguely by the visions which the Maiden projected and psychologically, Walter has very little will and is easily directed by the other characters. Moments of decision or crisis are usually handled by others (the escape from the Wood across the mountain pass). Walter’s literary forebears had some direction in their quests: Gawain journeyed to keep the appointment with the Green Knight, Bunyan’s Christian had his destination however beset with pitfalls. But the nineteenth century introduced the aimless wanderer — Ahaseurus looking only for rest with no idea where to get it.

Walter’s destination is nevertheless a lucky one. After freeing his Dionysian desires in the Wood beyond the World, he stumbles into a kingship by making a fortunate choice of war-woes over the tomes of kindly wisdom. He later proves worthy of even the “rain of peace,” but his naked birth into Stark-wall demonstrates the value of valiancy in a somewhat cowardly age.

In the later portion of the book Apollonian light sparkles continuously. When the Wood is left behind and the Dryads are set aside for government, Reason and Intelligence direct Walter. He makes a very wise king, and the land prospers. Walter’s quest reflects the Fisher King Myth here, as did the Maiden’s revival of the Land of the Bear people.

The Maiden’s revival of the drought-stricken land of the Bear people is the classic pattern of the Fisher King myth. It also allows her to assume a godhead. She tells the Bear people:

Now, then, is the day of your gladness come; for the old body is dead, and I am the new body of your God, come amongst you for your welfare.

Morris changes the myth slightly to allow Walter and the Maiden to escape over the mountains by making the Maiden beguile the Bear people into following her plan.

Now hearken! I wot well that ye would have somewhat of me, to wit, that I should send rain to end this drought, which otherwise seemeth like to lie long upon you: but this rain, I must go into the mountains to the south to fetch it you; therefore shall certain of your warriors bring me on my way, with my man, up to the great pass of the said mountains, and we shall set out thitherward this very day.

And what might be considered Dionysian elements, the deep mystical restoring of the land, is later seen as an Imaginative Apollonian conquest when the Maiden, as Queen, teaches the Bear people the art of cultivating crops. She is a vegetation goddess, goddess of agriculture, who uses Reason.

In the latter part of The Wood Beyond the World, then, the Apollonian light of Reason and Intellect drives back the black shadows of Dionysian indulgence and passion, and we know that the Maiden’s only change is her loss of wizardry. Cosmic order is achieved; Walter’s wise governmental order is reflective of the cosmic one. With that the tension is eliminated. The vying of mythic forces is squelched, with the less frenetic and dramatically dynamic victorious, and Morris moves from his penetration into sexual obsessions to his vision of a better society. The Woods are back beyond the mountains and only once more does it reach into the Maiden’s heart:

Thereafter she sent more gifts and messages to the Bears, but never again went herself to see.
them; for as good a face as she put on it that last time, yet her heart waxed cold with fear, and it almost seemed to her that her Mistress was alive again, and that she was escaping from her and plotting against her once more.

The realm of illusions and released desires fades for Walter and the Maiden, but the reader wonders who next will thrust himself through the shard and wander in the Wood.

Walter E. Houghton's study of Victorian optimism in The Victorian Frame of Mind (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957) does not mention Morris. Houghton could have dealt with News From Nowhere, which Morris preferred to call a Utopian "vision" rather than "dream". Although the work appeared near the end of the age (1890), it still shows the influence of that same optimism that guided many of the earlier Victorians whom Houghton does deal with.
