

Is Trilby a Victim or a Victor?

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Trilby O'Ferral, the eponymous heroine of *Trilby* (1894), the novel by George Du Maurier (1834-1896), is loved by almost all men in the novel. As a model for artists and a stage performer, her body becomes an object of men's gaze. Although Trilby is literally tone-deaf, she becomes a great singer when hypnotized by a mysterious musician, Svengali. Further, although few scenes in the novel involve the presence of Svengali, readers consider him to be the most interesting character because of his grotesque Jewish looks and his magical power over Trilby. When hypnotized by him, not only can Trilby change into a great diva, Madam Svengali, but she also becomes a totally different person – one who completely ignores Little Billee, a successful English painter she is deeply in love with. Through his ability to mesmerize her, Svengali can control her according to his will and succeeds in drawing out a majestic voice from her body. After his sudden death, however, she loses her ability to sing beautifully. Moreover, she finds herself drained of her physical strength and dies an untimely death.

There has been little agreement among critics about whether Trilby should be regarded as a victim or a victor. Ruth Bienstock Anolik, for example, emphasizes the fact that Trilby is a victim of Svengali's "demonic possession" (Anolik 168), and Alison

Winter also notes that Svengali "actually erased her" and destroyed her individual identity (Winter 339-41). On the other hand, Nina Auerbach argues that Trilby herself possessed the power to bring about her own metamorphosis. She also states that, in fact, Trilby did not need Svengali to "incite her to new incarnations" (Auerbach 18). My aim in this paper is to explore the portrayal of this star-crossed heroine by focusing on the description of eyes.

At first sight, Trilby does not seem to be a very attractive woman: her eyes are "too wide apart"; her mouth, "too large"; and her chin, "too massive" (13). The narrator emphasizes the largeness of her facial structure, which would suit "a singularly handsome boy" (13). Moreover, she is very tall and wears male clothing. All of these characteristics indicate that she cannot adapt herself to the framework of conventional female virtues required in the Victorian era. Instead, these characteristics symbolize her independence, unconventionality, and freedom (Allingham). Trilby shows no hesitation when she visits Little Billee and his friends' studio alone for the first time. In addition, she is not abashed by curious looks from men and is relaxed before people she is meeting for the first time. As a model, she has been accustomed to the company of men.

Svengali happens to be present at the studio when Trilby visits it. From the very outset, his eyes, when he is staring at Trilby, are described as intense and ominous, as if he could pierce her with them: he "flashed a pair of languishing black eyes at her with intent to kill" (16). However, she is totally unfazed by his attention and never returns his gaze, although she looks at whatever she likes both inside and outside of the studio. When she says, "Ye're all English, now, aren't ye?" (13), it is obvious that the figure of Svengali, whose appearance clearly shows that he is a Jew, is out of her line of vision. Thus, the power of his gaze has no effect upon her while she embodies a free lifestyle and is unconscious of the gaze of the male characters.

Regardless of Trilby's intention, not only Svengali but also Little Billee, who is described as having "the quick, prehensile, aesthetic eye" (15), cannot help turning their gaze on her. It is likely that her extraordinary clothes, especially her short petticoat that exposes her bare ankles, has a strong impact on them. According to Riina Toya, ankle-length petticoats, called "mini skirts," became a big fad around the 1860s, and men found hemlines that revealed a woman's ankles very attractive at that time (Toya 38-39, 95). Du Maurier set his story in the 1850s, so it is easily conceivable that Trilby's white bare ankles attract men instinctively and irresistibly. Thus, her body becomes the object that draws Little Billee's covert and Svengali's overt greedy gaze.

Even before Trilby makes an appearance in the novel, the fact that women are reduced to objects of men's gaze is demonstrated by Du Maurier's own illustration (Fig.1).¹ In this picture, a young woman painter, who will never be mentioned subsequently in the novel, is drawn in the foreground and occupies the most space in the picture. The central

characters—the three English artists, Taffy, the Laird and Little Billee—are only sketched roughly as small figures in the background. The female painter in the picture is eagerly copying out a painting in the museum; however, nobody in the novel takes any interest in her skills and performance as a painter. Even the reader, just like Little Billee who enjoys the sight of this unknown woman painter from the background, cannot help casting a curious glance at her own body.



Figure 1

Trilby's body is exposed to and literally severed by the intent gaze of men. Little Billee draws a picture of her left foot on the wall of the studio. Further, after hypnotizing Trilby for the first time, Svengali looks into and checks up her mouth, enumerating the features he observes in it:

"Himmel! The roof of your mouth is like the dome of the Panthéon; there is room in it for "toutes les glories de la France," and a little to spare! The entrance to your throat is like the middle porch of

St Sulpice when the doors are open for the faithful on All Saints' Day; and not one tooth is missing—thirty-two British teeth as white as milk and as big as knuckle-bones! and your little tongue is scooped out like the leaf of a pink peony, and the bridge of your nose is like the belly of a Stradivarius—what a sounding-board! and inside your beautiful big chest the lungs are made of leather! and your breath, it embalms—like the breath of a beautiful white heifer fed on the buttercups and daisies of the Vaterland! and you have a quick, soft, susceptible heart, a heart of gold, *ma-moiselle* (sic) — all that sees itself in your face! (50-51)

By Reporting what he sees in Trilby's mouth, and describing each feature in terms of an image, Svengali severs Trilby's body into parts, and even refers to the organs that he cannot actually see, such as her lungs and her heart. It is noteworthy that both Little Billee and Svengali break down Trilby's body in this manner as the first step to gaining possession of her. This shows their potential fear of accepting her as what she is.² The healthy, well-grown and lively Trilby who embodies freedom is more than they can handle.

After Trilby finds that the studio of the three Englishmen is "quite the nicest, homeliest, genialest, jolliest studio in the whole Quartier Latin" (60), she begins to frequent it and decides to "make herself both useful and ornamental" (61) to them. It is in the studio that she first displays dissociation of a personality — namely, she divides herself into "Trilby speaking English and Trilby speaking French" (64). Under the influence of *les trois Angliches*, she begins to grow "more English every day" (64). As Elaine Showalter notes, Trilby's transformation

can be explained as a process of her "Anglicization" (Showalter xviii).³ We may say that the transitional form of this transformation from a French *grisette* to an English "lady" (64) is evident in the description of her "sitting cross-legged on the model-throne darning the Laird's socks or sewing buttons on his shirts or repairing the smoke-holes in his trousers" (62); that is to say, she sits as a model for their sketches, and also plays the role of a housewife. Her "Anglicization" parallels her reshaping as a domesticated woman.

As Trilby's love for Little Billee grows, even her appearance undergoes changes. In short, she becomes more feminine:

Also, she grew thinner, especially in the face, where the bones of her cheeks and jaws began to show themselves, and these bones were constructed on such right principles... that the improvement was astonishing, almost inexplicable.

Also, she lost her freckles as the summer waned and she herself went less into the open air. And she let her hair grow, and made of it a small knot at the back of her head, and showed her little flat ears ... (90)

Trilby becomes thinner, and that makes her look smaller; thus, we may say it becomes much easier for Little Billee to possess her. Further, the fact that she begins to go out less than she did before indicates that her lifestyle, which has been free from social conventions, gradually approaches the domestic lifestyle of English middle-class women. By limiting her range of activities, Trilby undermines her own liberty. The fact that she wears her hair tied back in a knot also seems to represent the restraint she has imposed on herself. It becomes obvious that

the Anglicization and feminization of Trilby are closely connected.

Her feminization is completed when Little Billee sees her posing nude at Carrel's studio. As a model, Trilby has been "absolutely without that kind of shame" (66), but at the very moment that she recognizes the intense shock on Little Billee's face, she becomes conscious of being gazed at by *a man*, and not just an artist. It is clear that Trilby imbibes Little Billee's values—English middle-class values—as she loves him. Although she has been used to being stared at, it is at this moment that the gaze of a man gains special significance for her. Thus, the feeling of shame, a new one for her, comes to her like a revelation. Trilby explains her emotions in the letter she writes to the Laird: "It seemed as natural for me to sit as for a man. Now I see the awful difference" (85).

We should note that Trilby cannot see this difference clearly until she considered in "nice clean English" (82). It is worth pointing out that Trilby seems to stick to her cleanliness. The narrator also describes the difference, using the word "cleanliness".

Hitherto, for Trilby, self-respect had meant little more than the mere *cleanliness* of her body, in which she had always revelled;... It now meant another kind of *cleanliness*, and she would luxuriate in it for evermore; and the dreadful past—never to be forgotten by her—should be so lived down as in time, perhaps, to be forgotten by others. (87, emphasis added)

The fact that Trilby becomes a *blanchisseuse de fin*, one whose job it is to clean clothes, after she stops modelling, may be symbolic. Even after she breaks out of her five-year trance after the sudden death of Svengali,

she expresses the earnest hope of returning to cleanliness by again serving as a *blanchisseuse de fin*, the "clean old trade" (263). We may note, in passing, that clean Little Billee and his English artist friends are apparently contrasted with the dirty Jewish Svengali. The contrast is stressed in the scene in which Svengali, whose "eyes and temples were decidedly grimy" (47), finds Little Billee and Taffy are sitting in the bathtub and washing themselves with the "energetic fashion of Englishmen" (47) when he visits them to ask for a loan, and laughs heartily at them. Through them, clean and pure Englishness is counterposed to dirty and malicious Jewishness. However, let us return to Trilby. No matter how ardently she wishes it to happen, the fact that her past cannot be cleaned is strongly indicated by the reaction of Mrs Bagot, Little Billee's mother, when she finds out her son's intention to marry Trilby: Mrs Bogot never consents to her son's marrying her. Trilby's inner agony, which makes her feel unclean, comes to the surface as the pain in her eyes.

It is definitely important to note that Trilby has had neuralgia in her eyes. Svengali first takes advantage of the aches and pains of her eyes in order to exercise his mesmeric power. However, as mentioned above, Trilby would not come under his influence as long as she was completely indifferent towards him. Therefore, he can display his hypnotic power only when she calls for his help, although she is reluctant to accept it. It is known that Du Maurier himself was seriously concerned about the possibility of turning totally blind at the time he was writing *Trilby*. Therefore, it is no wonder that he repeatedly used various expressions concerning eyes and the act of seeing (Showalter xiii). For example, Trilby's eyes are described as follows:

But sometimes Little Billee would look up from his work as she was sitting to Taffy or the Laird, and find her grey eyes fixed on him with an all-enfolding gaze, so piercingly, penetratingly, unutterable sweet and kind and tender, such a brooding, dovelike look of soft and warm solicitude, that he would feel a flutter at his heart, and his hand would shake so that he could not paint; and in a waking dream he would remember that his mother had often looked at him like that when he was a small boy, and she a beautiful young woman untouched by care or sorrow; (65)

Many adjectives and adverbs are used to describe Trilby's eyes, almost as if it is impossible to sketch her eyes in words. Furthermore, the above quotation implies that her eyes have the power to spellbind Little Billee. The illustration for this scene, titled "The Soft Eyes" (Figure 2), shows that all the three painters are simply looking up at her with their brushes in mid-air.⁴ In particular, Little Billee's body seems to stiffen, enchanted by her eyes. Trilby can be regarded as the Muse who gives them artistic inspiration; however, at the same time, she can be considered to be Medusa, one who petrifies their brushes.



Figure 2

The above quotation also suggests that her eyes remind Little Billee of his mother. Later, when he meets "sweet Alice," she looks at him "with Trilby's eyes; or his mother's" (175). That he cannot distinguish her eyes from those of his beloved women indicates that Little Billee has begun to associate Trilby with respectable English women. Further, Trilby's eyes also have the power to make him blind to the fact that her social status is different from his own and that she cannot be a suitable bride for him. This is something that a typical respectable English woman like Mrs Bagot can never fail to see.

The power of Trilby's visual image is vividly revived when Little Billee sees her on stage five years later. "[W]ell-remembered sweetnesses of her changing face kept painting themselves on his retina" (223-224), and the haunting image of Trilby almost drives him mad. Trilby's ability to transform herself also seems to increase after she falls under the influence of Svengali. In London, her image dominates the streets.

A crowd of people as usual, only bigger, is assembled in front of the windows of the Stereoscopic Company in Regent Street, gazing at presentments of Madame Svengali *in all sizes and costumes*. She is very beautiful – there is no doubt of that; and the expression of her face is sweet and kind and sad, and of such a distinction that one feels an imperial crown would become her even better than her modest little coronet of golden stars. (243-244, emphasis added)

Now, her image is exposed to and consumed by the public. In addition, Trilby, who has been only a poor *grisette* in the Quartier Latin, can be a queen or a Greek goddess and

can change the size of her figure without any difficulty in the photograph. Little Billee, who buys her pictures in bulk, becomes increasingly obsessed with her.

He finally gets her back after Svengali's sudden death, and takes her to his house in Fitzroy Square. As we have seen above, Trilby served three English painters as their housewife in their studio; however, after her breakdown, it is they who serve Trilby. The narrator tells us that her portraits drawn by four painters, including Little Billee, at that time are "all so singularly like her, and so singularly unlike each other!" (266). Dynamic and multifaceted as she is, Trilby's personality is reflected in their drawings.

If Little Billee tried to remould her into a respectable English woman, we may say that Svengali emancipates her from the framework of the respectability the former set up. To echo Gecko's words, Svengali aims to reshape her into "*his* Trilby" (298). Svengali desires to own her wholly and he succeeds in making her a famous singer through hypnotism.

Although Trilby has become desperate, it is important that she goes to Svengali of her own will. This indicates that she herself has laid the groundwork for her new incarnation as a great stage performer. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that she disguises herself by wearing men's clothes when she turns up at his place. It is implied that Trilby, who has imbibed the values of respectable English women under Little Billee's influence, gets rid of them by discarding female clothes. Therefore, Svengali might have only lent the finishing touch to her metamorphosis.

Figure 3 shows Svengali and an unconscious Trilby as a diva at the pinnacle of their career.⁵ Svengali stares intently at her and wields a baton like a magic wand,

but Trilby *does not* see him. Instead, her eyes appear to be gazing far above him into space. Although Trilby is under the complete control of Svengali, paradoxically, she appears to be dominating him, as she towers over him.



Figure 3

Stephen Kern states that Svengali's control over Trilby ultimately fails, and argues that his command over her is only superficial (Kern 97-98). However, their relationship is more ambiguous, for Svengali can exercise the power of his eyes even after his death, through a look "straight out of the picture" (282).⁶ His photograph has the power to drive her to her death by draining the last reserves of her strength. At the very least, we can say that Svengali does not allow Trilby, who has been protected under Little Billee's roof, to survive and refuses to hand her over to this English painter.

With the magical power of the eyes, Svengali holds Trilby on a string, and makes her "think his thoughts and wish his wishes"

(299). Nevertheless, we should not overlook the fact that he himself is tormented by the obsession of possessing her completely.

He had for his wife, slave, and pupil a fierce, jealous kind of affection that was a source of endless torment to him; for indelibly graven in her heart, which he wished to occupy alone, was the never-fading image of the little English painter, and of this she made no secret. (245)

After Svengali's death, Trilby explains to *les trois Angliches* that she "never could be fond of him in the way he wished" (258) when she was conscious; therefore, as Kern acutely points out, just like Little Billee, Svengali is possessed "in trying to possess her" (Kern 98).

Both Little Billee and Svengali were hopelessly attracted to Trilby and they tried to remould her according to their desires. On the other hand, although Trilby possessed the power to metamorphose, she needed to come under their influence in order to use this power. From this perspective, we can conclude that becoming conscious of men's gaze was an essential step for her to accomplish her new incarnation. She had to become the object of their gaze and be severed by their looks. Further, as she continued to be affected by them, her health and liveliness began to decline, and she was forced to lead a tragic life that ended in her untimely death. Although Trilby's fully-developed body has been emphasized at the beginning of the novel, the transformation in her appearance are depicted through her becoming thinner. As her body actually shrinks, her visual image is instead enlarged. Her image becomes immortal and haunts both Little Billee and Svengali. It would not

be an exaggeration to state that it ultimately hastens their deaths. Thus, in conclusion, Trilby exhausted herself through her relationships with Little Billee and Svengali; however, both of them failed to gain complete possession of her. Trilby was affected by Little Billee and spellbound by Svengali, but she herself affected both of them and held them spellbound. In addition, twenty years later, she continues to rules the fantasies of the survivors, Gecko and Taffy, leaving a deep and lasting impression of her in their minds. In this sense, Trilby is a victor.

Notes

- 1 George Du Maurier, "Among the Old Masters," illustration for *Trilby*, 1894.
- 2 Elaine Showalter points out that the fragmentation of Trilby's body "can be seen as displacements of and defences against a potentially terrifying female sexuality" (xiv).
- 3 Sarah Gracombe also focuses on the process of the "conversion" of Trilby. She juxtaposes two attempts of Trilby's conversion: one is Svengali's and the other is Little Billee's. She interprets Little Billee's attempts as an effort to remake Trilby into a model of "Englishness" which is in contrast with Svengali's Jewishness.
- 4 George Du Maurier, "The Soft Eyes," illustration for *Trilby*, 1894.
- 5 George Du Maurier, "Au Clair de la Lune," illustration for *Trilby*, 1894.
- 6 Ruth Bienstock Anolik argues about the power that Svengali's representation has. (176-78).

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