

EVELYN DE MORGAN: SPIRITUALISM AND SYMBOLISM

On her seventeenth birthday, August 30th 1872, Evelyn De Morgan wrote in her diary: “*At the beginning of each year I say ‘I will do something’ and at the end I have done nothing. Art is eternal, but life is short*”. This statement illustrates the themes which were to dominate her adult life and career as a professional artist: the desire to produce art which expresses deeply spiritual messages, and the obstacles she faced as a woman artist in achieving public and professional recognition.

De Morgan was a successful and prolific artist, exhibiting a range of her works from 1877 until her death in 1919. Her style is distinctive in its rich use of colour, allegory and the dominance of the female form. Her paintings display a specific interest in the confinement and limitations of the physical body on earth. Often this is resolved through death (for example *The Angel of Death*), where death is shown as a welcome threshold to an afterlife. Death also appears as the final means of escape for women, in images of martyrdom (*Catherine of Alexandria, The Christian Martyr*). Her inspiration came from her combined interests in spiritualism and women’s rights.

Spiritualism was a popular strand of unorthodox belief from the mid-19th century originating in America, with séances, table-turnings, and levitations, through the control of a medium. William De Morgan’s mother, Sophia, was a clairvoyant medium. After the marriage of Evelyn and William in 1887, the couple began a prolonged ‘experiment’ with automatic (or trance) spirit writing which resulted in the anonymous publication in 1909 of the transcripts of *The Result of an Experiment*. Many of the ideas in this book can be traced in De Morgan’s paintings, for example spiritual blindness and the struggle for enlightenment form the allegories in works such as *The Captives* and *The Passing of the Soul at Death*.

Many of De Morgan’s works have been described as ‘symbolist’. In the painting *Lux in Tenebris* (1895) for example, she takes a biblical theme of Christ as the Light in Darkness and reworks it by substituting a female figure, dressed in pale gold robes, holding out the olive branch of peace in her right hand. She sits in an aura (a mandorla) of light, surrounded by darkness. At the foot of the painting, lurking in the turgid waters, are crocodile-beasts. The woman is allegorised as a metaphor of hope and courage, and also as a figure of divine (female) power. This echoes many of the sentiments in *The Result of an Experiment*, where an angel states “all on earth are in the dark, but above light shines, and it is open to all to reach it.”

With the Boer War in 1899, and World War 1 in 1914, De Morgan uses her art to express the fears shared by many about the effects and horrors of war. In paintings such as *S.O.S.* she combines an anti-war message with her spiritualist beliefs. Here, a lone figure stands on a rocky outcrop in the ocean, beset on all sides by mythological beasts. This can be read as dismay at the encroaching war, and also in terms of her spiritualist belief in the redemptive figure of the female as a symbol of optimism.

De Morgan’s use of colour is very distinctive and used to represent psychological and esoteric states. Rainbow iridescent shades appear in many of her works; the rainbow was considered in mythology to form a bridge for the soul after death and this is in keeping with her spiritualism. Other rich colours were also symbolic - the yellow in *The Love Potion* suggest a sympathy with the figure of the witch and the red in *The Red Cross* and *The Christian Martyr* is used as a symbol of martyrdom.

De Morgan’s works offer a fascinating insight into key Victorian concerns and ideas. Her lifelong interest in spiritualism is linked to her feminist and anti-war beliefs, and these form the inspiration for many of her works and enable us to understand them in new and revealing ways.