

*Research Article*

## The Semiotic Reading of “Liberty” in Alfred Tennyson’s “Of Old Sat Freedom on the Heights” and Eugene Delacroix’s “Liberty Leading the People”


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Article Info	Abstract
Article History	Ferdinand Victor Eugene Delacroix’s well-known painting “Liberty Leading the People” (1830)
Received Sep 25, 2022	and Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s verse “Of Old Sat Freedom on the Heights” (1834) have been read
Revised Nov 20, 2022	in various ways. In this paper, we try to ignore the historical context, instead, we focus on dis-
Accepted Nov 25, 2022	closing the analogy between these selected works by decoding the signs and elements, and pre-
<b>Keywords</b>	presenting the hidden meanings. Through a close analysis, we shed light on the concept of “liberty”
Power relations	within the female figure which seems to be the focal point in both the image and the text. This
Eugene Delacroix	notion is related to manufactured power relations (Michel Foucault) and the concept of ideology
Lord Tennyson	(Louis Althusser).
Liberty	
ideology	
Feminism	

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### 1. Introduction

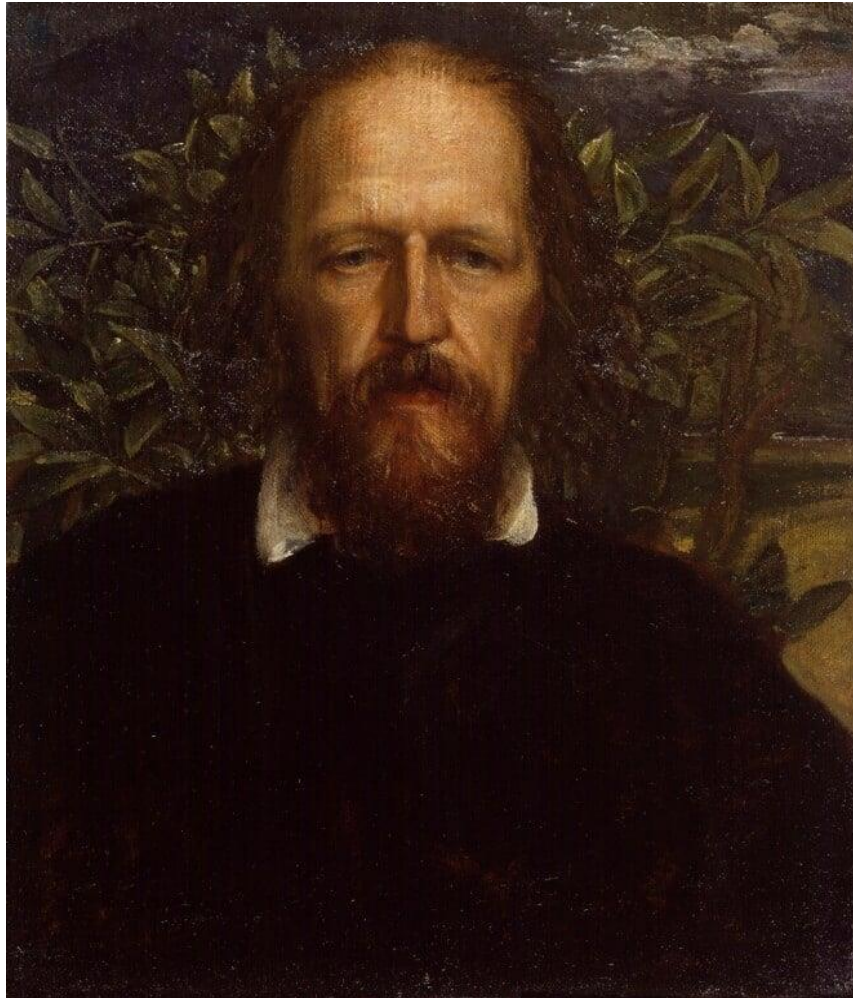
Ferdinand Victor Eugene Delacroix (Figure 1), was a prominent member of the French-Roman movement. He was raised at the Lycee Louis-le-Grand under the instruction of Pierre-Narcisse Guerin (artin-context, 2022). Delacroix painted “Liberty Leading the People” in 1830, immediately following the revolutionary fervor that had swept across Paris that year. This substantial oil painting on canvas is characterized by its allegorical and political significance and has come to represent liberty and democracy around the world. It is one of the most renowned paintings in art history and is frequently utilized in popular culture to symbolize people's liberation from oppressive dominance (Artsper, 2019). Commonly, critics have read his visual work in terms of a historical event which is thought that it has a reference to the French revolution. However, others say that this painting’s revolution should not be mistaken for the French Revolution of

1789, but rather The July Revolution, which is also known as "The Three Glorious Days" in French, wherein occurred in Paris in 1830, served as a source of inspiration for Delacroix. The French King Charles X, who was in power at the time, attempted to limit the people's freedom by carrying out a constitutional takeover, which resulted in these violent protests. Hence, Parisians reacted angrily to the violations of their personal liberties.



**Figure 1.** Self-portrait with Green Vest, Eugene Delacroix (1837) (Artsper, 2019)

Rioters grabbed control of the city, and there was intense fighting that left a large number of people dead. Louis-Philippe I was crowned king of France during the July Monarchy, which was founded after Charles X eventually abdicated (Artsper, 2019). Similarly, Chaulagain (2018) states that Delacroix's work presents the picture of war with a female figure leading the rest of the people. Triangles and rectangles, two harmonious geometric shapes, which can be found in Delacroix's painting's shape. Because of the central people and three other marching figures, the artwork is balanced, depicting an insurrection, and the composition is triangular. There are lying dead bodies and moving people in the two horizontal rectangles that separate the canvas. The other work which we analyze in this paper is the verse by the English poet, Alfred Lord Tennyson (Figure 2), who served as Poet Laureate for a sizable portion of Queen Victoria's reign. In one of his early works, "Timbuktu," Tennyson received the Chancellor's Gold Medal at Cambridge in 1829, and his first solo collection of poetry was released in 1830. Tennyson's "Of Old Sat Freedom on the Heights" was first published in 1842, it appears to have been written in 1834, in post-script to a letter from Tennyson to James Spedding dated 1834 (Gradesaver, n.d).



**Figure 2** Alfred, Lord Tennyson by George Frederic Watts oil on canvas, 1895 (National Portrait Gallery)

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study analyzes the poem "Of Old Sat Freedom on the Heights" by Lord Tennyson and the painting "Liberty Leading the People" by Eugene Delacroix through semiotic reading which is the study of signs and symbols. This theory was first used by the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, whose study shows that language is a system of signs made up of words, pictures, or sounds which are classified as signifiers, as well as the meanings that are associated with actual objects – signified. Similar to linguistic analysis, the semiotic analysis focuses on meanings rather than historical and biographical references. As a result, the significations of the chosen text and painting are examined, and the concept is connected to the theoretical frameworks of Foucault's power relations.

### 3. Results and Discussions

Lord Tennyson's poem "Of Old Sat Freedom on the Heights" appears to be read as the analysis of Eugene Delacroix's painting "Liberty Leading the People". On the one hand, Tennyson's verse is written in 1834 and consists of six quatrains. On the other hand, Delacroix's "Liberty Leading the People" is an oil painting that shows a common notion with the verse as we make this comparison from the first quatrain of the poem that describes freedom through a narrative voice:

Of old sat Freedom on the heights,..

The thunders breaking at her feet:

In the first line of the poem, the word "sat" has a meaning in Indian dogma, which refers to something that is true, essential, and cannot be changed. This term initiates "freedom", thus, it appears to suggest that "freedom" is real and cannot be taken away. The word "freedom" strikingly, is initiated with the capital "F" which seems to indicate it is a proper noun. Also, the first line suggests the idea that liberty is something that is not present or has not existed for a long time and is out of reach as it "sat in the heights". However, "heights" can also be associated with heaven. In this case, freedom is an ideal that has been passed down from above to humans. Furthermore, freedom is regarded as "her" in the poem, thus, she could be symbolizing *Marianne* who is the Goddess of Liberty in France. In addition to this, there is also a Roman Goddess named *Libertas* who is viewed by people as the symbol of freedom after she is freed from slavery. In relation to this point, the temple of this goddess is at "Aventine Hill" and this place has two "heights," so it raises the possibility of freedom being a Goddess in the poem. In connection to that – in the painting – (Figure 3), the woman standing in the centre with the French flag that is the portrayal of freedom and liberty. Within this context, she could be the representation of the Roman Goddess considering that she is leading others with a flag in one hand and a weapon in her other hand, while others are following her with the desire for freedom. Additionally, the colour blue in the painting can be seen clearly in many places such as on clothes, on the flag and in the sky. From this perspective, this colour is associated with liberation, so this reinforces the possible theme in the painting. Ultimately, the idea of liberty is essential and this could be the reason why it is displayed in the centre and on the "heights" both in the verse and in the image.





**Figure 3.** “Liberty Leading the People” (1830) by Eugène Delacroix (Artsper, 2019)

Furthermore, the female figure is sitting in the sky with thunder breaking at her feet. At this point, “feet” are the main part of the body that a person stands on. Hence, this seems to signify that the thunders are breaking because she is powerful. In one sense “thunder” is associated with supernatural power which flows from the sky toward the earth. In connection with the painting, the “thunders” might metaphorically describe the weapons like guns and blades which people are holding. At this point, the idea of thunders in the poem also appears here as the way that “liberty” protects the female figure. As a corollary, it reinforces the strength and determination of freedom.

In addition, “thunders” which are breaking at the woman’s feet, suggest the idea of power. Accordingly, this can be connected to feminism. Although feminism had not yet fully emerged at the time these works were made, it is possible to see some feminist traces. From this perspective, this creates the possibility that those who need independence are women as they are oppressed by men from the beginning of civilization. If so, this appears to have a link to the painting as there is only one-woman figure standing in the centre and is surrounded by men. She is looking back at them holding a bayonet as if she is trying to fight them all alone.

At the same time, the fact that she has bare breasts may suggest the idea that she is challenging the stereotypical views about women in which they have to cover their bodies. Moreover, the female breasts can also symbolize motherhood and vitality. From this point of view, breasts which can be associated with reproduction and breastfeeding can highlight the idea of women's lack of sexual and reproductive rights. It might also suggest the concept of objectifying women as sexual objects and domestic workers. That is to say, it is possible to notice that the woman in the painting is quite masculine, which suggests the notion – women strive to dispute the traditional beliefs about the difference between men and women. For this reason, there might be a hidden concept of feminism and gender inequality in both the painting and the text.

In these lines, the concepts of 'power' and 'freedom' are suggested once more:

Above her shook the starry lights:  
She heard the torrents meet.

Here, the word "shook" implies shaking or being upset – on the one hand, it seems to suggest that the "starry lights" are shaking because of fear that is resulting from "freedom". In this context, these lights can be the stars, gods and goddesses or people from the higher class. From this standpoint, the power of freedom has become the source of others' fear. In relation to the painting, the way "liberty" is standing at the centre as the only woman shows that she is not afraid to fight and she is the one whom people should fear from. For this reason, the expression: "above her shook the starry lights," in the poem appears as a reference to the people who have a higher position that is shaking with the fear of "liberty".

On the other hand, liberty's breasts are exposed and this might indicate that she is sexualized and lost her position and power in the painting, yet, it perhaps suggests that she is destroying the idea of a woman who is oppressed. Approached from this angle, it is possible to connect this to patriarchy which is a system that gives absolute power to the male while oppressing and excluding women. From this perspective, the female figure is demolishing the concept of male dominance by portraying a powerful, courageous leadership image. Hence, she is changing the general stereotypes between masculinity line and femininity by representing a female soul who has authority and power by breaking them.

However, this line also implies the idea that it is night, and usually, the notion of the night is associated with darkness and loss of faith. In other words, freedom appeared at a moment everyone was losing their faith. Then, she heard the meeting of "torrents" which is a large amount of water – flood. From this point of view, the torrents can metaphorically represent people who are coming all together to seek freedom.

In addition to this, a torrent is usually considered to be forceful – it suggests that these torrents symbolise humans who are going to do anything that they can like approach violence. Considering this angle, the same scenarios are depicted in the painting where liberty is looking to the side of all the people who follow it from children to adults and from all classes. In addition to this, the fact that a torrent is forceful or violent can be the representation of the war which they own since in the painting there are dead people and lots of guns and swords. Hence, people began to reach their freedom and they are ready to do everything and this is demonstrated in the poem and the painting.

In this stanza, the significance and divinity of liberty can be seen more clearly as the torrents meet;

There in her place she did rejoice,  
Self-gather'd in her prophet-mind,  
But fragments of her mighty voice  
Came rolling on the wind.

At this point, the narrator indicates that she shows happiness which might be a result of the act of hearing the torrents meet which are the people who are taking action. However, the word "rejoice" also indicates "disposed to God's grace", hence, this signifies this mission or freedom that is approved by God with joy. In addition to this, the colour yellow which is the colour of Liberty's dress in the painting can also be connected to this in terms of positivity. Simultaneously, the yellow on her dress is also close to gold which might link to divinity which portrays her as something holy.

Moreover, "she" who personifies freedom is considered a figure with supernatural power who seems to be a woman and carries the message as a feminist to break the traditions and seek justice and freedom. At this point, giving power and considering a female figure destroys the idea of a patriarchal society that views women as oppressed, fragile, and inferior-citizen in terms of power relations. This notion is related to the concept of "gaze" in Michel Foucault's examination of power relations in the "Panopticism" part of his book, *Discipline and Punish*, which denotes the meaning of (observation) or (watching). In other words, the person being watched is subject to the authority of the watcher. The English philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) coined the terms "panopticism" and "panopticon," respectively, describes the panopticon as a jail inside a circular structure with a tower at its centre and the convicts arranged around it. The startling

fact is that they cannot see inside the tower, therefore they had to exercise vigilant caution in how they behaved.

According to Foucault, the panopticon can actually be found everywhere, including a hospital, a school, or a prison (Foucault, 1977, pp. 195-206). Therefore, the pieces of feminism can be seen in her. In other words, the male figures in the painting and the people in the poem are both following a strong and independent woman – they show her respect and this suggests the idea that men and women can have the same rights, features and skills. Foucault's concept of the *gaze* is not depicted in the painting only, but actually outside the visual art – that is to say between the female figure in the image and the viewer's eyes.

Furthermore, the concept of freedom is illustrated through the hat she is wearing which is known as the "Phrygian cap". This is considered to be the symbol of freedom, hence, the way that liberty is wearing that cap raises the idea of independence. At the same time, the colour of the hat is red and it is usually associated with strength, passion, war and danger. In these terms, the value of freedom is highlighted in the painting with this item. Another item that can be linked to independence is the French flag that she is holding. In other words, the colours on the flag which are blue, red and white represent freedom, strength or revolution, and purity or new beginnings respectively. At this point, the new era that will come with freedom is going to be strong when the revolution for it is over.

From a broader perspective, the "wind" is often associated with freedom as it can move as it pleases and it is seen as the dangerous power of nature. For this reason, the concept of liberty's pieces is distributed to the whole world. In the case of the painting, there is a possibility that the people who follow the Liberty are coming like a wind towards viewers, which is fast and dangerously growing every minute since there are lots of people and silhouettes behind her. Hence, the fight for independence started quickly and people are eager to obtain it.

These lines of the verse show the way freedom is descended among people;

Then stept she down thro' town and field  
To mingle with the human race,  
And part by part to men reveal'd  
The fulness of her face—



Freedom descends and spreads in the world, she spreads through towns and fields – “to mingle” with people. However, this creates the concept that she is not a part of the human race and she is some sort of another species or a divine being. Moreover, usually “town” symbolizes the high and middle-class while the “field” symbolizes the lower or working-class. From this point of view, freedom is among everyone regardless of class. This can be connected with the painting as there are people from different classes standing behind the woman who is portrayed as liberty; the man with a pistol on his waist and a sword in his right hand who does not wear a coat but wears only a shirt is a middle-class man. The pin on his hat highlights his revolutionary ideas and his desire for liberty. The man next to him with a coat, vest, and top hat who holds a rifle gun is clearly from the high class. Moreover, the man standing on his knees in a blue shirt and red bandanna at the feet of the woman who symbolizes freedom is definitely from the lower class. It is clear that he is from the working class and he does not own a weapon like the others in the painting. The painting and the verse give the idea that people from different social classes are gathering all together with a desire for liberty. From this standpoint, there is every kind of people from various classes, race, and ages in the painting.

This concept is related to communism which advocates a classless society and indicates public ownership which mainly signifies the notion of not giving treatment or advantages according to class. In other words, the way people want to fight for freedom shows that they want to destroy the current system which discriminates and creates a society in which everyone is free and has the same rights. It is through an apprenticeship in a variety of know-how wrapped in the massive inculcation of the ideology of the ruling class that the relations of production in a capitalist social formation, i.e. the relations of exploited to exploiters and exploiters to exploited, are largely reproduced. This concept is what Althusser refers to as the dominant "ideological state apparatus." A school-wide ideology that portrays the institution as a neutral setting free of ideology naturally hides and covers up the mechanisms that lead to this crucial outcome for the capitalist regime because it is one of the fundamental manifestations of the prevailing bourgeois ideology (Althusser, 2001, 1495). In other words, from a communist angle, every individual in the image stands against those ideological states.

Moreover, “to mingle” simply means to combine or mix with something else, generally without losing one's individuality. This highlights the idea that freedom is not an idea imposed on people, instead,

it lies within them waiting to be extracted. Furthermore, the narrator indicates that: “and part by part to men reveal'd, the fulness of her face,” which suggests that the notion of liberty showed itself to the people slowly and “part by part” in the verse. This might demonstrate that at first people should integrate themselves with the value of freedom before they fully believe it. With regard to the painting, freedom’s face is a perfect classical profile, evoking ancient Greek and Roman figures. Also, the way she looks back at the people following her can simply be the idea in the poem of how they are increasing slowly and to call and encourage them to move forward. However, the smoke is restricting the vision, so it is not clear the number of people. Additionally, the white smoke and the whiteness in other objects represent goodness, purity and a successful beginning. At this point, this can be a reference to victory and the innocent act of seeking freedom.

The fourth stanza also draws attention to the essence of liberty through an analogy with things like “God, altar and King”:

`Grave mother of majestic works,  
From her isle-altar gazing down,  
Who, God-like, grasps the triple forks,  
And, King-like, wears the crown:

Apart from the literal meaning of the word “grave”. On one hand, the word “grave” initiates the term “mother” which might symbolize passion, responsibility, or creation. At this point, the seriousness and significance of independence are illustrated and thus there might be a possibility that she is the mother of human race. From this perspective, she is considered to be their loving leader who is going to create a new era where people have their liberty, therefore, independence is referred to as “majestic work”.

On the other hand, it might also suggest the idea that freedom which requires rebellion and revolution is a majestic work and it is bloody which results in a lot of loss and death. This is patriated in the painting as dead people are lying on the ground under the feet of the woman who is the symbol of liberty. There are two soldiers on the lower right and a citizen on the lower left lying dead which highlights the cost of revolution and the path to freedom. In relation to this, she is stepping on the dead bodies and this can be linked to the poem where “freedom” is referred to as “grave mother”. At this point, she is the only female figure in the painting that can be exactly seen and she is standing at the top of people and bodies like their

leader. Additionally, it seems to show that she is looking to the people for a long time from her "isle-altar". Considered from this angle, the word "altar" metaphorically represents the high-class or the authority who has oppressed working-class – women in particular.

Then, freedom is likened to God – people who rule the sovereign – who "grasps the triple forks". Commonly the word "fork" can be used to describe a place where a road or river is divided into parts. Also, "grasp" might mean taking an opportunity or taking something quickly. Thus, this might signify the idea that freedom is like a god as she sees different opportunities and paths and knows how to grasp them.

From a broader perspective, "the triple forks" might also symbolize the trident of Poseidon. In general, Poseidon is sometimes referred to as "the storm bringer" because of the powers of his trident which gave him the ability to conjure tornadoes, tidal waves, and hurricanes. Poseidon's trident also provided him with the ability to create earthquakes and destroy anything by striking his trident into the ground. All of these can be metaphorically likened to the features of revolutions performed by people to obtain their freedom. In other words, in order to obtain freedom, people have to start a revolution and destroy the present system to build a new one. Thus, Poseidon's trident which has the ability to create earthquakes and destroy anything can be a metaphor for revolutions. This can be connected to the painting as it is possible to notice that there is a wall made out of stones and they are breaking through that wall by destroying it.

In addition, in the poem "freedom" is also likened to a king who wears crowns. At this point, it is possible to assume that there is a victory, and people got rid of what was oppressing them. This seems to be associated with the painting; in the upper right corner of the painting, it is possible to see a very noticeable building which is the cathedral of Notre Dame. Moreover, this building was a symbol of monarchy and conservatism. In this case, the "torrents" in the first stanza which might symbolize the people who meet and began to take action could be the bourgeois and proletariat coming together and taking action against the monarchy. Thus, it is possible to say that they took what monarchs do, and now who is ruling them is liberty. From another perspective, it is possible to say that the last line of this stanza also highlights the idea of gender inequalities in terms of male hegemony. If this is considered from a feminist point of view, the line "and, King-like, wears the crown" represents the patriarchal system. The "king" signifies generally the men and highlights that they are the ones who wear the crown and rule the world. However, in this poem who is likened to a king is independent it is personified as a female. For this reason, this might

again represent the idea that women are challenging the patriarchal system. As a corollary, she wears the crown like kin and this puts her in the position of a leader who will lead the humans. Ultimately, the essence of liberty is illustrated with objects like “isle-altar”, “trinity forks” and “King” in the poem.

This stanza illustrates the significance of “freedom”:

Her open eyes desire the truth.  
The wisdom of a thousand years  
Is in them. May perpetual youth  
Keep dry their light from tears;

At this point, “open eyes” symbolizes the realization of the truth. This implies the idea that she opened her eyes and is conscious of reality. Moreover, this proposes the idea that she is ready to take action for her most desired wish because she realizes or is aware that independence is in the real world. Additionally, she suggests that a thousand years of knowledge and experience are in her eyes and this seems to suggest that she saw lots of things and is now ready for them. In the painting, Liberty’s eyes are open and she is looking at the crowd like she is mindful of her wisdom as a goddess. Meanwhile, the woman who symbolizes liberty is demonstrated as having “the wisdom of a thousand years” which can be an irony to highlight the inequalities women face regarding the lack of education. This appears to be related to the feminist approach which spreads awareness about gender inequalities. In this case, those who open their eyes with a desire for truth are oppressed women. That is to say, they have been abused throughout their lives and they are constantly taught to be passive, quiet, polite, and obedient. Also, they are imposed by the concept of being a domestic worker and a “mother” rather than a leader or warrior.

Furthermore, “youth” is considered to be the beginning stage of life and it has positive aspects. From this point of view, the narrator claims that this new beginning and positivity that will come with freedom is never-ending which protects people from slavery. From a broader perspective, a “light” also make something start burning so this suggests that their tear will burn up like sparks of power and fight for freedom. Thus, people’s pain will be eliminated with victory. This point can also connect to the painting with the figure of a young schoolboy who has guns. Within this framework, that boy the need for liberty from the early stages of one’s lifetime. However, the line “may perpetual youth keep dry their light from tears” might also suggest the idea that liberty is immortal and she will always be there for people. Also, as

this stanza is describing eyes, the last line describes the folk's enthusiastic passion to reach liberty. As it says "keep dry their light from tears" which could depict the phrase "eyes light up". This provides the idea of enthusiasm. From this point of view, it might signify the notion that people should strive to obtain their independence.

The final stanza describes the reason why people should not cry it also describes through irony:

That her fair form may stand and shine,  
Make bright our days and light our dreams,  
Turning to scorn with lips divine  
The falsehood of extremes!

Finally, the narrator gives reasons why people should "keep dry their light from tears". They should not cry so that freedom's "fair form" can maintain its position and shine. The female figure should shine to make their days "bright" and "light" their dreams. In this case, as "bright" means various things such as being full of light, intelligence, success, hope, and joy it represents the idea that freedom brings light to people and it opens their eyes. Furthermore, "light" is usually combined with darkness which symbolizes the unknown, death, or loss of faith, whereas light signifies life, hope, and happiness. This can be connected to the painting as the background, especially where liberty stands is bright and white. In a way, this signifies the idea that freedom protects people. Then, the narrator states that they turn to "scorn with lips divine the falsehood of extremes". In other words, "lips" are the flesh of the opening of the mouth and are used to speak. Also, the narrator might use the word "divine" to highlight that they are now powerful and they have the freedom of voice and speech. They use their voice to "scorn" or to refuse the things they consider as "the falsehood of extremes" which could be the untrue, unreasonable, and extreme expectations about how they must behave and think. These falsehood of extremes are the things that take away people's freedom and oppresses them by brainwashing and manipulating them. This suggests that people are now fully aware of the inequalities and will never stop going against them.

#### **4. Conclusions**

In this paper, we attempted to show that both Delacroix's "Liberty Leading the People" and Alfred Lord Tennyson's "Of Old Sat Freedom on the Heights" represent the image of people escaping from slavery and oppression. From a broader perspective, there are two predominant possibilities. On one hand,

they could signify how the monarchy or the capitalist system oppresses and enslaves the people, and the result is people's revolt to obtain freedom. Thus, there might be a communist point of view within this poem and painting – Althusser's ideology. On the other hand, they might represent how women are oppressed by a patriarchal society through power relations – Foucault's concept of the gaze, and how feminism began in the first place. The concept of freedom is regarded as a "falsehood of extremes!" and it is seen as something completely unattainable. In short, these two masterpieces have many similarities in terms of the representations of liberty.

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