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| **The Lady of Shalott** |  |
| by [Lord Alfred Tennyson](http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/300) | |
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| Part I  On either side the river lie  Long fields of barley and of rye,  That clothe the wold and meet the sky;  And through the field the road runs by  To many-towered Camelot;  And up and down the people go,  Gazing where the lilies blow  Round an island there below,  The island of Shalott.  Willows whiten, aspens quiver,  Little breezes dusk and shiver  Through the wave that runs for ever  By the island in the river  Flowing down to Camelot.  Four grey walls, and four grey towers,  Overlook a space of flowers,  And the silent isle imbowers  The Lady of Shalott.  By the margin, willow-veiled,  Slide the heavy barges trailed  By slow horses; and unhailed  The shallop flitteth silken-sailed  Skimming down to Camelot:  But who hath seen her wave her hand?  Or at the casement seen her stand?  Or is she known in all the land,  The Lady of Shalott?  Only reapers, reaping early  In among the bearded barley,  Hear a song that echoes cheerly  From the river winding clearly,  Down to towered Camelot:  And by the moon the reaper weary,  Piling sheaves in uplands airy,  Listening, whispers "'Tis the fairy  Lady of Shalott."  Part II  There she weaves by night and day  A magic web with colours gay.  She has heard a whisper say,  A curse is on her if she stay  To look down to Camelot.  She knows not what the curse may be,  And so she weaveth steadily,  And little other care hath she,  The Lady of Shalott.  And moving through a mirror clear  That hangs before her all the year,  Shadows of the world appear.  There she sees the highway near  Winding down to Camelot:  There the river eddy whirls,  And there the surly village-churls,  And the red cloaks of market girls,  Pass onward from Shalott.  Sometimes a troop of damsels glad,  An abbot on an ambling pad,  Sometimes a curly shepherd-lad,  Or long-haired page in crimson clad,  Goes by to towered Camelot;  And sometimes through the mirror blue  The knights come riding two and two:  She hath no loyal knight and true,  The Lady of Shalott.  But in her web she still delights  To weave the mirror's magic sights,  For often through the silent nights  A funeral, with plumes and lights  And music, went to Camelot:  Or when the moon was overhead,  Came two young lovers lately wed;  "I am half sick of shadows," said  The Lady of Shalott.  Part III    A bow-shot from her bower-eaves,  He rode between the barley-sheaves,  The sun came dazzling through the leaves,  And flamed upon the brazen greaves  Of bold Sir Lancelot.  A red-cross knight for ever kneeled  To a lady in his shield,  That sparkled on the yellow field,  Beside remote Shalott.    The gemmy bridle glittered free,  Like to some branch of stars we see  Hung in the golden Galaxy.  The bridle bells rang merrily  As he rode down to Camelot:  And from his blazoned baldric slung  A mighty silver bugle hung,  And as he rode his armour rung,  Beside remote Shalott.    All in the blue unclouded weather  Thick-jewelled shone the saddle-leather,  The helmet and the helmet-feather  Burned like one burning flame together,  As he rode down to Camelot.  As often through the purple night,  Below the starry clusters bright,  Some bearded meteor, trailing light,  Moves over still Shalott.    His broad clear brow in sunlight glowed;  On burnished hooves his war-horse trode;  From underneath his helmet flowed  His coal-black curls as on he rode,  As he rode down to Camelot.  From the bank and from the river  He flashed into the crystal mirror,  "Tirra lirra," by the river  Sang Sir Lancelot.    She left the web, she left the loom,  She made three paces through the room,  She saw the water-lily bloom,  She saw the helmet and the plume,  She looked down to Camelot.  Out flew the web and floated wide;  The mirror cracked from side to side;  "The curse is come upon me," cried  The Lady of Shalott.    Part IV  In the stormy east-wind straining,  The pale yellow woods were waning,  The broad stream in his banks complaining,  Heavily the low sky raining  Over towered Camelot;  Down she came and found a boat  Beneath a willow left afloat,  And round about the prow she wrote  *The Lady of Shalott*.    And down the river's dim expanse,  Like some bold seër in a trance  Seeing all his own mischance--  With a glassy countenance  Did she look to Camelot.  And at the closing of the day  She loosed the chain, and down she lay;  The broad stream bore her far away,  The Lady of Shalott.    Lying, robed in snowy white  That loosely flew to left and right--  The leaves upon her falling light--  Through the noises of the night  She floated down to Camelot:  And as the boat-head wound along  The willowy hills and fields among,  They heard her singing her last song,  The Lady of Shalott.    Heard a carol, mournful, holy,  Chanted loudly, chanted lowly,  Till her blood was frozen slowly,  And her eyes were darkened wholly,  Turned to towered Camelot.  For ere she reached upon the tide  The first house by the water-side,  Singing in her song she died,  The Lady of Shalott.    Under tower and balcony,  By garden-wall and gallery,  A gleaming shape she floated by,  Dead-pale between the houses high,  Silent into Camelot.  Out upon the wharfs they came,  Knight and burgher, lord and dame,  And round the prow they read her name,  *The Lady of Shalott*.  Who is this? and what is here?  And in the lighted palace near  Died the sound of royal cheer;  And they crossed themselves for fear,  All the knights at Camelot:  But Lancelot mused a little space;  He said, "She has a lovely face;  God in his mercy lend her grace,  The Lady of Shalott." |  |

**Poetry Notes**

*.* The theme of the poem depends on how one interprets it. For example, if the reader takes into account Tennyson's [source material](http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides8/Shalott.html#Source) and thus assumes that the lady seeks the attentions of Lancelot, unrequited love and its tragic result become the theme. On the other hand, if the reader interprets the poem as a commentary on the plight of women in Tennyson's time, the confining role of women becomes the theme. In Europe in the early 1830s, when Tennyson completed the first version of the poem, unmarried women were expected to remain passive in the home or at social events as they awaited the overtures of suitors. Married women were expected to domesticate themselves, overseeing household management and the rearing of children. Venturing into the male-dominated world to pursue one's desires was considered anathema. If Tennyson had the latter theme in mind, the reader can only speculate on whether he was defending or condemning the Lady of Shalott's decision to abandon her sanctuary and enter the world.

Parts 1 and 2 of Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" ([text](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/tennyson/los1.html)) provide the backdrop for the central action of the poem — the flight of the lady from her captivity and her subsequent death. The "silent isle" on which she lives is marked only by "Four gray walls, and four gray towers". This description, with its repetitious construction and use of the bland color gray, permeates the reader's image of the island with dullness and monotony. Furthermore, Tennyson pointedly remarks that the gray towers "Overlook a space of flowers" which plays up the contrast between the lifelessness of the gray stone, and the vibrancy of the garden outside (16). Even his use of a contained rhyming couplet brings the aesthetic disparity into the foreground. And so, Tennyson's vision of the Lady of Shalott immediately sets her apart from the vitality of the natural world, placing her in a realm of stagnancy and inertness. Indeed, it is interesting to note that, like many of the Preraphelites, the focus on a solitary contemplative female figure is a recurring theme in his work, for example, in [*Mariana*](http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/millais/paintings/mariana.html).

Yet, amidst her colorless environment, the Lady of Shalott weaves "A magic web with colors gay" (38). How can we interpret this spontaneous production of magic, art and color? It appears as though Tennyson is indicating that the production of art occurs in melancholy isolation from the very world it mimics. Thus, in the first two parts of "The Lady of Shalott" Tennyson constructs a representation of the artist as a solitary and confined figure, inexplicably compelled to create, as if literally bound by a "curse".

In the latter poem Tennyson achieves the same feat in a different way, by dividing the poem into a descriptive and a narrative portion. The first two sections of the poem present a series of static descriptions narrated in the present tense, such as:

"There she weaves by night and day   
A magic web with colours gay.  
She has heard a whisper say,  
A curse is on her if she stay  
To look down to Camelot.  
She knows not what the curse may be,  
And so she weaveth steadily,  
And little other care hath she,  
The Lady of Shalott."

By using the present tense, Tennyson frames the Lady of Shalott's weaving as a continuous, static action which does not and will not change. Indeed, the threat of the curse forces her to maintain this static existence. Thus the first two sections of the poem simply describe the Lady's unchanging life and the unchanging landscapes that surround her. In the third and fourth sections, however, Tennyson switches to the past tense as he narrates the story of the Lady's encounter with Sir Lancelot:

"She left the web, she left the loom,  
She made three paces thro' the room,  
She saw the water-lily bloom,  
She saw the helmet and the plume,  
She looked down to Camelot.  
Out flew the web and floated wide;  
The mirror crack'd from side to side;  
'The curse is come upon me,' cried  
The Lady of Shalott."

The change in tense indicates that the poem has now become a story of unique events rather than a description of static conditions. The introduction of a new element — Sir Lancelot — into the Lady's life concides with the introduction of change and movement into her previously static situation. However, in attempting to act and to change her life, the Lady triggers the curse which will soon kill her. When she tries to become the protagonist of a story rather than a participant in a static description, she dies.

Some scholars maintain that the theme is the conflict an artist (writer, painter, sculptor, composer of music, etc.) faces in his attempt to remain aloof from the world and his desire to enter it. As Natalie Lewis says,

The lady working on her tapestry in a secluded tower represents the contemplative Victorian artist isolated from daily social life . . .  There is a tragic ambivalence between the artist's desire for social involvement and his fear that such an involvement will destroy his poetic inspiration. In order to objectively transform life into art, the artist needs a distance from the turbulences of life. Disillusioned from their social environment, many Victorian artists retreated into dream worlds of the past. Although they often felt the urge to make statements on contemporary social and political problems, they tried to avoid a direct approach to such topics and rather chose to address those issues under the disguise medieval legend or Christian allegory. (Tennyson's Poetry as Inspiration for Pre-Raphaelite Art. Norderstedt, Germany: Druck und Bindung, Books on Demand GmbH, 2003, page 12)

The use of repetition ties the poem together and gives it structure.  Tennyson repeats “The Lady of Shalott” after each stanza and the word Camelot ends every fifth line.  This repetition mimics the ordered and repetitious life that Lady Shalott leads day after day.  When Sir Lancelot comes into the poem the repetition is disrupted.  Sir Lancelot replaces Lady Shalott at the end of each stanza.  This signifies that Sir Lancelot disrupted Lady Shalott’s ordered life and that thinking of him is all that occupies her time now. After the mirror breaks the repetition and order goes back to the way it was to show that her life is once again ordered after her death.

Symbolism is an important aspect of the Lady of Shalott.  Some important symbols are the tapestry, the mirror, and the curse.  The tapestry is the world that the Lady of Shalott exists in.  It is her reality.  She looks through the mirrors distorted view and weaves what she sees.  It is her experience and memory.  But, the Lady of Shalott does not se true reality but a distorted view.  The mirror represents the Lady of Shalott's naiveté and innocence  It is the rose-colored glass through which she sees reality.  Furthermore, because, a mirror is not the truth, and is instead only a reflection of the truth, it shows the distorted view that the Lady of Shalott has. (The mirror being distorted reality is especially interesting when one considers that it is typically used as a symbol of the cold, hard truth.  This difference gives added emphasis on the importance of this symbol within the poem, as  well as telling us that the Lady of Shalott did not realize that view of the world was warped.)   All this changes when she looks out the window and onto an undistorted world.  The Lady of Shalott loses her innocence by falling in love.  Thus, the tapestry (how she saw the world) flies out the window and disappears, and the mirror (the naive perspective through which she sees the world) cracks.  The Lady of Shalott is unable to handle the loss of her world coupled with the unrequited love she feels for Sir Lancelot and kills herself.  The curse that the Lady of Shalott falls prey to is unrequited love.  She loves Lancelot loves Queen Guinevere.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "[The Lady of Shalott](http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/tennyson/los1.html)" is a fine example of a poem whose poetic achievement lies at the precise convergence of both a fascinating subject matter and several significant stylistic elements. A narrative that takes on mythic overtones by recasting an Arthurian story, this poem is somehow still able to stay very much rooted to the natural; indeed, much of the poem either performs the natural, or is informed by it. Because so much of this is contrapuntally weaved in and out of the narrative, as a deeply rooted part of the Lady of Shalott's life as an embowered woman, an undeniable symbolism arises. One might call this poem a distorted still-life — not the literal definition for visual art, but much more metaphorically — in that there are certain fixations in the poem, such as the mirror, the loom, the river, music, even the color red ("red cloaks of market girls," "a red cross knight," "long-hair'd page in crimson clad"), that work together within a similiar landscape and thereby carry symbolic weight. But perhaps what is most interesting of this still-life approach is the severity of irony given to the poem — given to its subject matter, and thus theme.

While the poem begins with four stanzas that slowly work into greater and greater detail about the myth of a woman through a description of the landscape and anonymous workers, we do soon learn much more personally — from inside the four walls — how the Lady of Shalott lives. The first stanza quoted above is not the first in the poem to narrate how she weaves in insolation; we learn early on that she does so under a yet unknown curse. But the quoted stanza's importance is that there is irony in this bit of character development for the mythic woman: Though she apparently "delights / To weave," she is "'half sick of shadows'". It is also here that Tennyson brings in a polyphony of symbols — the mirror and the loom — which are further layered with the natural in the following stanza. After witnessing the livelihood of the knight, after finally feeling her total isolation — the loss of freedom in all her years of weaving and seeing the world through a distorted tableau — the Lady of Shalott realizes her doom: the irretrievable loss, her curse, her irony. Tennyson describes it as the physical breakage of the mirror and the physical departure of the web. He then follows by suggesting that the will of the Lady causes the weakness of the natural, and that in order to fully come out of the isolation, she will reject the circular — forever continuous, unchanging, unpredictable — pattern of the loom for the horizontal — down or upstream, wide, farstretching, unforseeable, most importantly, real being — path of a boat. Of course, we have already been flooded with images of that river and its great expanse.

**Personification**

At the beginning of the poem, Tennyson uses personification to paint a vivid picture of the landscape surrounding the castle. "Long fields of barley and rye/ that clothe the world and meet the sky." This literary technique gives the reader a comfortable, cozy feeling, as though the earth is snuggled into the soft blanket of nature.

This feeling of security does not last for long. The poem goes on, "Little breezes dusk and shiver/ through the wave that runs forever." Already, the poet is starting to add a note of uneasiness and tension to the scene. "Dusk" makes the reader think of forecoming darkness or the end of a day. When someone is very cold or very afraid, they may shiver, so this word contributes a hint of fear to the poem. These lines also foreshadow the tragedy that occurs later in the poem--it is as if even nature shivers at the thought of what is to come.

Tennyson describes the castle as, "Four gray walls and four gray towers/ overlook the space of flowers."  This personification of the castle serves to give the building an omnipotent position as the overseer of all that takes place outside its walls. The walls also foreshadow that the lady of Shallot is trapped inside the castle and she may never escape its confines. The flowers growing down below the castle are lilies, which are a symbol for death. It seems as though the palace is watching and waiting for the lady to die.

Personification of nature creates images of sadness and gloom that permeate the poem as it continues. "The pale yellow woods were waning/ The broad streaming banks his complaining/ Heavily the low sky raining."  Now it seems that not only does nature perceive the death that is to come, but  is complaining about it. Rain is nature's way of shedding tears, so the sky is so weighed down by the burden of the situation that it is crying.

The frequency of personification throughout the poem follows the lady of Shalott's life. At the beginning of the poem, Tennyson uses personification often, because this is when the lady herself is  the most alive with the clearest sense-of-self and purpose. As the lady loses her self-confidence and desire to live, the amount of personification in the poem also dwindles. Nature loses its human characteristics along with the lady of Shallot as she loses hers.

**Rhyme**

*.......*The end rhyme in each stanza follows this pattern: AAAABCCCB. Internal rhyme also occurs. Following are examples.

On either side the river lie (line 1)

That clothe the wold and meet the sky (line 3)

the silent isle imbowers (line 17)

moving thro' a mirror clear (line 46)

there the surly village-churls (line 52)

round the prow they read her name (line 125)

Throughout the poem, in each stanza lines 5 and 9 end in the words Camelot and Shalott.  The link that exists between Shalott and Camelot as well as the ordered, patterned life the Lady of Shalott leads. Everything fits  into the pattern as it  should.  There is no change, only small variations (different A and C rrhymes in each stanza) which fit into an ordered scheme.  However, the introduction of Lancelot in [Sec III](http://barney.gonzaga.edu/~cherr/The-Lady-of-Shalott--Analysis-for-ENGL-102.html) complicates things.  He interposes  himself into the Camelot/Shalott rhyme thus symbolizing the changes he unintentionally made in the Lady of Shalott's life.  The pattern is broken.  After Lancelot leaves, the rhyme scheme returns to how it was (Camelot/Shalott) but it is as if the Lady of Shalott is trying to take back the control she lost over her life, thus killing herself in [Sec IV](http://barney.gonzaga.edu/~cherr/The-Lady-of-Shalott--Analysis-for-ENGL-102.html) to maintain what she had.

**Meter**

The longer lines in the poem alternate between [iambic tetrameter](http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/xmeter.html#top) and [trochaic tetrameter](http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/xmeter.html#top) with [catalexis](http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/xmeter.html" \l "top). For example, the first two lines in the poem are in iambic tetrameter.

...1..............2...............3............4   
on EI..|..ther SIDE..|..the RIV..|..er LIE

.........1.................2..............3.............4   
long FIELDS..|..of BAR..|..ley AND..|..of RYE

Lines 7 and 8, on the other hand, are in trochaic tetrameter with catalexis (an incomplete foot).

.....1.................2.................3.............4   
GAZ ing..|..WHERE the..|..LIL ies..|..BLOW

......1.................2...............3...............4   
ROUND an..|..IS land..|..THERE be..|..LOW

Note that the fourth foot in line 7 and the fourth foot in line 8 each contain only one syllable and therefore are incomplete (catalexis).

In lines of six syllables (three feet) [iambic trimeter](http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/xmeter.html#top) occurs, as in lines 9, 54, and 77.

....1..............2...............3   
The IS..|..land OF..|..Shal OTT

......1..................2...............3   
Pass ON..|..ward FROM..|..Sha..LOTT.

.......1...............2..............3   
Of BOLD..|..Sir LANC..|..e LOT

This poem is made to be spoken. The meter switches between being iambic and trochaic tetrameter, in order to make the poem flow when spoken and provide variety.  When read aloud, the poem sounds like the "carol, mournful, holy/ chanted loudly, chanted lowly" which the Lady of Shalott sings as she dies.  If  analyzing the meter seems confusing, read this poem out loud.  The stress and changes in meter follow common speech. But remember to also follow the punctuation. Below is an scansion of the first section.

**Summary**

Through fields of barley and rye runs the road to Camelot, the home of King Arthur. Parallel to the road is a river. As travelers come and go on the road, they turn their gaze to an island in the middle of the river, the Island of Shalott. There they see a gray, four-towered building that confines a young lady.

Horse-drawn barges and small sailboats pass the island. But no one on the road or the river ever sees the lady standing at a window. However, those who harvest the crops hear her singing from time to time, saying, " 'Tis the fairy Lady of Shalott" (line 35).

*.*This lady spends her time weaving a colorful magic web. She has heard someone say that she is under a curse. It dictates that she must never look out awindow or venture forth from her abode. What will happen to her if she abandons her weaving and gazes upon the world, or joins it, she does not know. To avoid provoking fate, she weaves on. However, a mirror in front of her enables her to see reflections from the outside—an ambling abbot, farmers, red-cloaked market girls, an ambling abbot, a shepherd boy, a page, knights.

*.* The Lady of Shalott has no knight to call her own. Her only pleasure is to weave into her web the scenes she sees. At night, she sometimes sees the end of life, a candlelit funeral; and sometimes the beginning of life, newlyweds under a bright moon.  *.*"I am half-sick of shadows," she laments (line 71).

One day, just an arrow shot away, Sir Lancelot rides by, the sunlight glinting off his greaves. On his resplendent shield, a knight kneels to a lady. Lancelot's armor and his steed's bridle bells ring as he rides, and his helmet and the jewels of his saddle burn bright like the stars of the night or a meteor blazing forth. As he rides on to Camelot, his black curls flowing from beneath his helmet, he sings a song.

Immediately, the lady abandons her weaving and stands at the window, looking toward Camelot and the horseman riding toward it. The mirror cracks. The curse takes hold.    
*.......* The lady goes outside, finds a boat, writes her name on it, and lies down in it, allowing the current to take her down toward Camelot. She sings a song—her last—a mournful melody. By and by, her blood freezes and her eyes darken. By the time she reaches Camelot, she is dead.   
*.......* The people come out—knights, burghers, lords and ladies—and read her name on the prow of the boat. The cheerful sounds of Camelot stop, and the knights of the realm make the sign of the cross. Lancelot comments on her beauty and says, "God in his mercy lend her grace, / The Lady of Shalott" (lines 169-170).