**Alfred Tennyson**

**"The Lady of Shalott"**

**1. Text of the Poem:**

**PART I**

On either side the river lie

Long fields of barley and of rye,

That clothe the wold and meet the sky;

And thro’ the field the road runs by

       To many-tower’d 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

Thro’ the wave that runs for ever

By the island in the river

       Flowing down to Camelot.

Four gray walls, and four gray towers,

Overlook a space of flowers,

And the silent isle imbowers

       The Lady of Shalott.

By the margin, willow veil’d,

Slide the heavy barges trail’d

By slow horses; and unhail’d

The shallop flitteth silken-sail’d

       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 tower’d 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 thro’ 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-hair’d page in crimson clad,

       Goes by to tower’d Camelot;

And sometimes thro’ 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 thro’ 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 thro’ the leaves,

And flamed upon the brazen greaves

       Of bold Sir Lancelot.

A red-cross knight for ever kneel’d

To a lady in his shield,

That sparkled on the yellow field,

   Beside remote Shalott.

The gemmy bridle glitter’d 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 blazon’d baldric slung

A mighty silver bugle hung,

And as he rode his armour rung,

       Beside remote Shalott.

All in the blue unclouded weather

Thick-jewell’d shone the saddle-leather,

The helmet and the helmet-feather

Burn’d like one burning flame together,

       As he rode down to Camelot.

As often thro’ the purple night,

Below the starry clusters bright,

Some bearded meteor, trailing light,

       Moves over still Shalott.

His broad clear brow in sunlight glow’d;

On burnish’d hooves his war-horse trode;

From underneath his helmet flow’d

His coal-black curls as on he rode,

       As he rode down to Camelot.

From the bank and from the river

He flash’d into the crystal mirror,

“Tirra lirra,” by the river

       Sang 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 look’d 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.

**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 tower’d 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—

Thro’ 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 darken’d wholly,

       Turn’d to tower’d Camelot.

For ere she reach’d 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 cross’d 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.”

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2. Summary:

Part I: The poem begins with a description of a river and a road that pass through long fields of barley and rye before reaching the town of Camelot. The people of the town travel along the road and look toward an island called Shalott, which lies further down the river. The island of Shalott contains several plants and flowers, including lilies, aspens, and willows. On the island, a woman known as the Lady of Shalott is imprisoned within a building made of “four gray walls and four gray towers.”

Both “heavy barges” and light open boats sail along the edge of the river to Camelot. But has anyone seen or heard of the lady who lives on the island in the river? Only the reapers who harvest the barley hear the echo of her singing. At night, the tired reaper listens to her singing and whispers that he hears her: “‘Tis the fairy Lady of Shalott.”

Part II: The Lady of Shalott weaves a magic, colorful web. She has heard a voice whisper that a curse will befall her if she looks down to Camelot, and she does not know what this curse would be. Thus, she concentrates solely on her weaving, never lifting her eyes.

However, as she weaves, a mirror hangs before her. In the mirror, she sees “shadows of the world,” including the highway road, which also passes through the fields, the eddies in the river, and the peasants of the town. Occasionally, she also sees a group of damsels, an abbot (church official), a young shepherd, or a page dressed in crimson. She sometimes sights a pair of knights riding by, though she has no loyal knight of her own to court her. Nonetheless, she enjoys her solitary weaving, though she expresses frustration with the world of shadows when she glimpses a funeral procession or a pair of newlyweds in the mirror.

Part III: A knight in brass armor (“brazen greaves”) comes riding through the fields of barley beside Shalott; the sun shines on his armor and makes it sparkle. As he rides, the gems on his horse’s bridle glitter like a constellation of stars, and the bells on the bridle ring. The knight hangs a bugle from his sash, and his armor makes ringing noises as he gallops alongside the remote island of Shalott.

In the “blue, unclouded weather,” the jewels on the knight’s saddle shine, making him look like a meteor in the purple sky. His forehead glows in the sunlight, and his black curly hair flows out from under his helmet. As he passes by the river, his image flashes into the Lady of Shalott’s mirror and he sings out “tirra lirra.” Upon seeing and hearing this knight, the Lady stops weaving her web and abandons her loom. The web flies out from the loom, and the mirror cracks, and the Lady announces the arrival of her doom: “The curse is come upon me.”

Part IV: As the sky breaks out in rain and storm, the Lady of Shalott descends from her tower and finds a boat. She writes the words “The Lady of Shalott” around the boat’s bow and looks downstream to Camelot like a prophet foreseeing his own misfortunes. In the evening, she lies down in the boat, and the stream carries her to Camelot.

The Lady of Shalott wears a snowy white robe and sings her last song as she sails down to Camelot. She sings until her blood freezes, her eyes darken, and she dies. When her boat sails silently into Camelot, all the knights, lords, and ladies of Camelot emerge from their halls to behold the sight. They read her name on the bow and “cross...themselves for fear.” Only the great knight Lancelot is bold enough to push aside the crowd, look closely at the dead maiden, and remark “She has a lovely face; God in his mercy lend her grace.”

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**3. Form:**

The poem is divided into four numbered parts with discrete, isometric (equally-long) stanzas. The first two parts contain four stanzas each, while the last two parts contain five. Each of the four parts ends at the moment when description yields to directly quoted speech: this speech first takes the form of the reaper’s whispering identification, then of the Lady’s half-sick lament, then of the Lady’s pronouncement of her doom, and finally, of Lancelot’s blessing. Each stanza contains nine lines with the rhyme scheme AAAABCCCB. The “B” always stands for “Camelot” in the fifth line and for “Shalott” in the ninth. The “A” and “C” lines are always in tetrameter, while the “B” lines are in trimeter. In addition, the syntax is line-bound: most phrases do not extend past the length of a single line.

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**Analysis:**

Originally written in 1832, this poem was later revised, and published in its final form in 1842. Tennyson claimed that he had based it on an old Italian romance, though the poem also bears much similarity to the story of the Maid of Astolat in Malory’s Morte d’Arthur. As in Malory’s account, Tennyson’s lyric includes references to the Arthurian legend; moreover, “Shalott” seems quite close to Malory’s “Astolat.”

Much of the poem’s charm stems from its sense of mystery and elusiveness; of course, these aspects also complicate the task of analysis. That said, most scholars understand “The Lady of Shalott” to be about the conflict between art and life. The Lady, who weaves her magic web and sings her song in a remote tower, can be seen to represent the contemplative artist isolated from the bustle and activity of daily life. The moment she sets her art aside to gaze down on the real world, a curse befalls her and she meets her tragic death. The poem thus captures the conflict between an artist’s desire for social involvement and his/her doubts about whether such a commitment is viable for someone dedicated to art. The poem may also express a more personal dilemma for Tennyson as a specific artist: while he felt an obligation to seek subject matter outside the world of his own mind and his own immediate experiences—to comment on politics, history, or a more general humanity—he also feared that this expansion into broader territories might destroy his poetry’s magic.

Part I and Part IV of this poem deal with the Lady of Shalott as she appears to the outside world, whereas Part II and Part III describe the world from the Lady’s perspective. In Part I, Tennyson portrays the Lady as secluded from the rest of the world by both water and the height of her tower. We are not told how she spends her time or what she thinks about; thus we, too, like everyone in the poem, are denied access to the interiority of her world. Interestingly, the only people who know that she exists are those whose occupations are most diametrically opposite her own: the reapers who toil in physical labor rather than by sitting and crafting works of beauty.

Part II describes the Lady’s experience of imprisonment from her own perspective. We learn that her alienation results from a mysterious curse: she is not allowed to look out on Camelot, so all her knowledge of the world must come from the reflections and shadows in her mirror. (It was common for weavers to use mirrors to see the progress of their tapestries from the side that would eventually be displayed to the viewer.) Tennyson notes that often she sees a funeral or a wedding, a disjunction that suggests the interchangeability, and hence the conflation, of love and death for the Lady: indeed, when she later falls in love with Lancelot, she will simultaneously bring upon her own death.

Whereas Part II makes reference to all the different types of people that the Lady sees through her mirror, including the knights who “come riding two and two” (line 61), Part III focuses on one particular knight who captures the Lady’s attention: Sir Lancelot. This dazzling knight is the hero of the King Arthur stories, famous for his illicit affair with the beautiful Queen Guinevere. He is described in an array of colors: he is a “red-cross knight”; his shield “sparkled on the yellow field”; he wears a “silver bugle”; he passes through “blue unclouded weather” and the “purple night,” and he has “coal-black curls.” He is also adorned in a “gemmy bridle” and other bejeweled garments, which sparkle in the light. Yet in spite of the rich visual details that Tennyson provides, it is the sound and not the sight of Lancelot that causes the Lady of Shalott to transgress her set boundaries: only when she hears him sing “Tirra lirra” does she leave her web and seal her doom. The intensification of the Lady’s experiences in this part of the poem is marked by the shift from the static, descriptive present tense of Parts I and II to the dynamic, active past of Parts III and IV.

In Part IV, all the lush color of the previous section gives way to “pale yellow” and “darkened” eyes, and the brilliance of the sunlight is replaced by a “low sky raining.” The moment the Lady sets her art aside to look upon Lancelot, she is seized with death. The end of her artistic isolation thus leads to the end of creativity: “Out flew her web and floated wide” (line 114). She also loses her mirror, which had been her only access to the outside world: “The mirror cracked from side to side” (line 115). Her turn to the outside world thus leaves her bereft both of her art object and of the instrument of her craft—and of her very life. Yet perhaps the greatest curse of all is that although she surrenders herself to the sight of Lancelot, she dies completely unappreciated by him. The poem ends with the tragic triviality of Lancelot’s response to her tremendous passion: all he has to say about her is that “she has a lovely face” (line 169). Having abandoned her artistry, the Lady of Shalott becomes herself an art object; no longer can she offer her creativity, but merely a “dead-pale” beauty (line 157).

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**Devices:**

The most striking formal aspect of this poem is its remarkably vivid images. “The Lady of Shalott” was a favorite with Victorian painters and illustrators, who understandably delighted in picturing the crisis of the curse with its sprung tapestry and cracking mirror. Those images, and that of the lady’s funeral barge at the poem’s close, have been admired by many modern critics as early examples of poetic symbolism. While the magic mirror and tapestry belong to the machinery of legend and fairy tale, they seem more than props in Tennyson’s hands. The lady’s mirror, for example, reflects not only the outside world but also the condition of the lady herself as an outsider. Both the lady and the mirror capture images within frames, the mirror in its glass, the lady in her tapestry. This identification is pushed even further at the poem’s close when the lady is described as having a “glassy countenance” as she gazes toward Camelot. Having preferred realities to shadows, having rejected the mirror’s vision for her own, she becomes a mirror herself; her countenance now mirrors her coming death.

Tennyson’s careful insistence on referring to the tapestry as a “web” suggests the idea of entanglement that is certainly part of the lady’s condition. The insect connotations of “web” are also admissible, for this web is very much made from the lady’s own substance: When it is disturbed, she dies. The careful texturing of these images reinforces, deepens, and extends their more conventional associations. The island’s isolation and the temporal significance of the river current also gain by their participation in a symbolic pattern of such complexity. It is the combination of suggestive images with a relatively discontinuous, seemingly naïve narrative that lends this poem its disquieting power. The poem anticipates the modern understanding of dreams as symbol systems suspended in masking narratives. As in dreams, the narrative line is deceptively simple; the deeper significance is encoded in symbol. Since the poem is essentially about the power of dream and symbol, of image over life, its symbolic images embody the poem’s theme rather than express it, which is very nearly the essence of modern poetic symbolism.

The collective effect of the symbol system in “The Lady of Shalott” is a powerful sense of narcissistic introversion. The Lady’s attempt to break out of her insularity fails because she is incapable of escaping her enslavement to images. The image of Lancelot himself had been cast into her mirror from the river surface and is nothing more than another representation of the reality she cannot reach. Trapped in the immobility of her island world of images, cut off from the world of transition and change—of life, love, and death—the lady rebels against her condition by casting herself adrift into the temporal tyranny of the river current. It pulls her into the world of living men and women, but she dies in transit, singing her own death song in a funeral barge emblazoned with her own name; her isolation is never broken.

The rhyme scheme of the poem is also a means for reinforcing the sense of inescapable isolation, for it is one of the most repetitive and insistent rhyme schemes to be found in serious English poetry. The sequence aaaabcccb is repeated throughout the poem, and all but one stanza end with the lady’s name as the final rhyme. The obsessive repetition of the name drives home her own repetitive obsessions. Images and metrical organization work together to create claustrophobia, a terrified sense of compulsive ritual that is wearying and inescapable.

**Alliteration**

Willows whiten

silken-sail'd

bearded barley

moving thro' a mirror

crimson clad,

no loyal knight

blazon'd baldric

**Anaphora**

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

**Assonance**

clothe the wold

**Metaphor**

Long fields of barley and of rye,

That clothe the wold

(Comparison of grain fields to clothing)

**Metaphor/Personification**

The broad stream in his banks complaining

(Comparison of the stream to a speaking human)

**Simile**

The gemmy bridle glitter'd free,

Like to some branch of stars we see

Hung in the golden Galaxy.

Comparison of the gems on the bridle to stars

The helmet and the helmet-feather

Burn'd like one burning flame together

(Comparison of the appearance of the helmet and the feather to a flame)

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