The Lady of Shalott

POEM TEXT

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."

SUMMARY

On either side of the river, long fields of barley and rye cover the open land like clothing and stretch toward the horizon. Through these fields runs the road that leads to the large castle of Camelot, which has many towers. As people walk up and down this road, they look out to a place where lilies grow: an island in the river called Shalott.

Willow trees grow pale, aspen trees tremble, and little breezes stir the surface of the river's water, which flows eternally past Shalott and toward Camelot. On the island, a square, gray, towered building looks out over a flower garden. This silent island encloses and shelters the Lady of Shalott.

Along the willow-draped banks of the river, heavy flat-bottomed boats are slowly towed along by horses. Unnoticed, little sailboats with silky sails travel lightly down the river to Camelot. But has anyone who passes by actually seen the Lady of Shalott wave her hand, or stand at her window? Does anyone actually know her at all, or is she just known as the Lady of Shalott all throughout the land?

Only the people harvesting grain in the early morning hear the sweet singing that echoes over the river as it flows toward Camelot. When the moon has come out and the tired reaper is piling up his grain on the airy hills, he listens, and whispers to himself that the singing is coming from the enchanted Lady of Shalott.

In her tower on Shalott, the Lady constantly weaves a beautiful tapestry in glorious colors. She has heard it whispered that a curse will fall on her if she looks directly toward Camelot. She doesn't know what this curse is, so she just keeps weaving, and and cares about little else.

Images of the outside world move through a clear mirror that always hangs in front of her. In this mirror she sees the nearby road winding toward Camelot. She sees the whirling surface of the river, the serious peasants, and the red cloaks of the girls going to market as they pass her tower.

Sometimes she sees a group of cheerful young women, or a clergyman riding along at a leisurely pace, or a curly-haired shepherd boy, or a long-haired young knight-in-training in bright red clothing, as they make their way toward Camelot. And sometimes, through the blue mirror, she sees knights riding in pairs: but the Lady herself has no knight to love and be faithful to her.

But she still loves to weave the wonderful sights that she sees in the mirror. Sometimes, in the quiet of the night, a funeral procession decked out with ornaments and lights and music will pass by on its way to Camelot. Once, when the moon was out, two newlyweds came by. "I'm half-sick of these reflections of the world," the Lady said.

Only an arrow's flight from the Lady's window, a man rode through the fields. The sun, shining brightly through the leaves, reflected intensely on the brassy shinguard armor of the brave Sir Lancelot. His shield carried an image of a Knight Templar kneeling to a lady; this bright picture sparkled against the yellow fields surrounding the isolated island of Shalott.

His horse's jewel-encrusted bridle glittered like the stars of the Milky Way, and its bells rang out cheerfully as he rode toward Camelot. From his decorated sword belt, a silver hunting horn hung, and his armor rung like a bell as he rode past the isolated island of Shalott.

Under the cloudless blue sky, his bejeweled saddle shone, and his plumed helmet burned like a flame as he rode toward Camelot. He looked like when, on a dark and starry night, a meteor passes over Shalott, trailing a beard of light behind it.

His handsome forehead glowed in the sun. His horse walked on hooves that gleamed like polished metal. From under his helmet flowed curly black hair as he rode on toward Camelot. The image of him on the riverbank flashed into the Lady's magic mirror as he sang to himself, "Tirra lirra."

The lady left her weaving on her loom, took three steps across the room, and saw from her window the blooming water-lily, Lancelot's feathered helmet, and Camelot. Her weaving then flew from the loom, and the magic mirror cracked straight across. The Lady cried: "The curse has come upon me!"

In the rough east wind, the pale yellow trees were losing their leaves, the river was making angry sounds, and the heavy sky rained on the towers of Camelot. The Lady came down from her tower and found an abandoned boat under a willow tree. She wrote her own name on the front.

Down the dark river, like a prophet having a horrible vision of his own doom, with a far-away expression, the Lady looked toward Camelot. When night began to fall, she released the boat from its mooring, lay down inside, and let the wide river

carry far her away.

Dressed in a flowing, fluttering white gown, with leaves falling down on her, moving through the sounds of the night, the Lady floated toward Camelot. As her boat passed through the hills and fields, the people she passed heard her singing her last song.

They heard a sad hymn, sung loud and low, as the Lady's blood turned cold and her eyes went dark, though they were still fixed on Camelot's towers. Before her boat had even gotten as far as the edge of town, the Lady of Shalott died, in the midst of her singing.

Under the town's towers, balconies, gardens, and long open walks, the Lady of Shalott floated by, a shining, pale shape moving silently into Camelot. The citizens—knights and townspeople, lords and ladies—all came out to the wharfs to see her, and read her name on the prow of the boat.

They wondered, "Who's this, and what's going on?" In the illuminated palace, the sounds of royal partying fell silent. All the knights of the Round Table made the sign of the Cross in fear. Only Sir Lancelot stopped and looked at the Lady for a while. He said, "She has a very pretty face," and prayed that God would be merciful to the Lady of Shalott.

THEMES

ARTISTIC ISOLATION

"The Lady of Shalott" is often taken as a metaphor for artistic isolation—the idea that an artist must distance themselves from the world in order to truthfully depict it in their work. Here, the titular Lady is confined to a fairy-tale tower, where she endlessly weaves a gorgeous tapestry and watches the world go by in a magic mirror. She's under a mysterious curse, and only finds out what it is when she looks away from her work and out her window into the real world. The things she sees there—the gorgeous Sir Lancelot, and the bustling, commercial, everyday world of Camelot—spell her doom. The Lady's curse, which demands that she focus all her attention on images, is the curse of the artist, for whom observing the world can make fully experiencing the world impossible.

The Lady is not any old knitter, but rather an adept weaver who makes beautiful tapestries of the images she sees in a magic mirror that indirectly shows her the world passing by outside. She seems to take pleasure in her artistry, but feels trapped by it, too; while she "delights" in making her tapestries, she is also "half sick of shadows," tired of only seeing the world through the lens of her artistic vision. In creating woven images of reflected images, she is at once deeply engaged with the world and painfully cut off from it.

And while she knows she's cursed, she has no idea what her curse actually is (though she knows it will take hold if she looks toward Camelot). She thus stays at her loom, reveling in her skill, but also imprisoned by it.

It's only when she looks out her window to see the handsome knight Sir Lancelot, rather than an *image* of him, that her mirror cracks and her weaving tears itself off its loom.

Connecting with the solid, physical world—even from a distance—is thus enough to break the Lady's vision-granting mirror and to destroy her artistry. The Lady's desire for Lancelot (who might represent not only the normal human pleasures of sex, but the lure of glory and fame), can't coexist with the Lady's pure art-making.

The mirror and tapestry also seem to be a part of the Lady herself: as soon as they're broken, she feels herself beginning to die. Her final act is to get out of her tower and arrange herself in a boat so her corpse will drift downriver to Camelot. Yet even in this last effort to put herself into the world, the Lady still works like an artist: she inscribes her name on the boat like a title, arranges her own body like an artwork, and sings as she dies. The curse keeps her trapped within a world of distanced art-making even as she leaves her cloistered tower.

The Lady of Shalott's gift is thus also her tragedy. She is able to represent the truth and beauty of the world through gorgeous images, but can't touch the glories her images represent. Her life is so bound up in art-making that she can't survive reality. Some of Tennyson's own anxiety about being an artist might appear here, of course. He, too, was a weaver—of words rather than threads.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Before Line 1
- Lines 1-36
- Between Lines 36-37
- Lines 37-72
- Between Lines 72-73
- Lines 73-117
- Between Lines 117-118
- Lines 118-171

VICTORIAN WOMEN'S SEXUALITY

It's not just plain curiosity that at last pulls the Lady away from her loom, but also sexuality—in the form of the dreamy Sir Lancelot riding by. Sexuality here is presented as an image of deep involvement in the world, and therefore as the strongest possible temptation. It's also something dangerous, the poem suggests, destroying not just the Lady herself but also the art she makes.

Of course, that the Lady is a *lady* speaks to a particularly Victorian anxiety about *women's* sexuality, which was heavily policed: for Victorian women, virginity was idealized, and desire

demonized. The poem suggests that such repression is fated to fail, however, and that restrained sexuality becomes a destructive force when it inevitably breaks through.

Even before Lancelot's arrival, there are hints that the Lady feels the absence of sexuality in her life as the greatest burden of her isolation. While she's described as taking "delight" in her solitary weaving, the poem also notes that there's no lover for her. When she finally declares that she's "half-sick of shadows," it's a vision of two young newlyweds that provokes her. The sight of joyful lovers, presumably dashing off to consummate their marriage, is the outer-world vision that has the strongest power over the Lady.

Sir Lancelot's appearance is described with loving care. He's both an idealized and an eroticized vision of masculinity, and it's his beauty that moves the lady to action. The Lady observes, not just his shining armor (representing his chivalrous virtues) and his lovely singing voice, but also his long curling hair. He seems to her to emit light like a meteor.

The instant he appears in the mirror, the Lady springs to her feet and rushes to the window. Lancelot physically compels her, making her body act before her mind can slow her down. Women's bodies, this scene suggests, won't accept unnatural restraints forever—and may break loose of the cultural superego's mental grip, expressing a destructive power.

The "curse" that falls on the Lady might thus be read as the curse of sexuality itself. The Lady never gets to fulfill her love for Lancelot. He only meets her after her death, when he remarks on her "lovely face." In this, she's rather like a classic Sleeping Beauty—a woman whose sexuality is utterly passive and frozen. However, considering that "dying" can be a euphemism for orgasm, there may be a hint here that the Lady is fulfilled—but that her fulfillment destroys her artistry and everything she's known.

The poem's anxiety about sexuality is thus stuck in the tension between the pain of sexual starvation and the destructiveness of sexual fulfillment. The Lady—like Victorian Englishwomen in general—is damned if she does and damned if she doesn't. The speaker's sympathy for her provides a critique of this dilemma at the same time as it links restrained, virginal sexual energy with purity of artistic intent.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 46-72
- Between Lines 72-73
- Lines 73-117
- Between Lines 117-118
- Lines 118-171

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-18

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.

The first two stanzas of "The Lady of Shalott" cast readers into a landscape that has elements of both the magical and the everyday. There's an immediacy to the poem's first lines: the speaker leaps right into "the river." What river? The speaker doesn't say: it's *the* river, that's all. Right away, then, there's a sense that this poem will treat its world symbolically.

The river runs through a beautiful, autumnal landscape, a place that any English country-dweller of the 19th century would find familiar. Expansive fields of grain run to the horizon, willows and aspens (types of trees) move in the breeze down by the riverbanks. But this bucolic picture is also a scene from a legend, as the reader quickly discovers. This is the countryside that surrounds Camelot, the royal seat of none other than King Arthur.

There's a contrast here between the eternal quality of the landscape and the mysterious no-time of legend:

- The fields, the trees, and the river could all be from almost *any* time in history.
- Camelot, though, is a place from old tales.

Already, then, this poem deals—on the one hand—with the natural, cyclical, and eternal, and—on the other hand—with the heroic, legendary, and magical.

These feelings are underlined by the shape of the verse. The poem quickly teaches its readers to expect a patterned refrain:

- Each stanza's middle line will always end in "Camelot" (for now, at least);
- And each stanza's last line will end in "Shalott."

This pattern works with both the legendary and natural aspects of the poem. The repeated, predictable sounds turn round and round like seasons, but the echoing words describe legendary castles and enchanted islands.

The other sound patterns in these stanzas do something similar. Dense alliteration, assonance, consonance, and sibilance evoke the sounds of the natural world, but also draw attention to themselves, reminding the reader that they're reading a *poem*—a work of *art*. Take a look at the first part of the second stanza for a good example:

> 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.

Rhyme and slant rhyme; assonance on short /ih/ and long /i/ sounds; consonance on /w/, /l/, /r/, /z/, /v/; sibilance throughout: there's a tapestry of woven sounds here. These euphonious sounds mimic the sounds of trees by a river, with the winds and the water moving quietly through.

But sound also plays games with sense here, and in potentially unnerving ways. "Dusk" is a strange word to use as a verb, and while "[w]illows whiten" is an evocative image, the reader might be hard-pressed to imagine exactly what that means the willows are doing. Showing the undersides of their leaves in the wind? Or going pale, like a human?

It's not easy to say, and this creates a feeling that this landscape is as *magical* as it is *natural*. That the trees and breezes seem, perhaps, a little scared—going pale, quivering and shivering—suggests that there's something more going on here than just another autumn day.

Meanwhile, on the island in the middle of this lovely landscape, things are different. Rather than gentle whitenings and quiverings, here there are "four gray walls, and four gray towers." The anaphora here, plus the mostly-monosyllabic words, make the castle feel imposing among all the natural beauty. The "silent isle" these towers rise up on seems not a little mysterious. (Looking ahead, the reader might also note that those walls and towers are the same in number as the parts of the poem: itself a castle enclosing a Lady.)

It is within this castle—foreboding and strange in a landscape that is at once welcoming and ominous—that the speaker gets their first hint of the unknown Lady of Shalott.

LINES 19-36

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."

Just after the speaker gives the reader a hint of the "Lady of Shalott" that this poem is supposed to be all about, something peculiar happens. The poem's perspective has been slowly zooming in, like a camera, from the fields to the river to the island to the castle to the Lady—but all of a sudden, the camera pulls right back again, returning the reader to the river again.

Here, there's a world of activity and bustle, very much in contrast with the "silent isle" of Shalott. However, this activity still seems to be passing through a part of the river made mysterious by the island's enchantments. The workaday horse-drawn barges are "veil'd" with willows, and "the shallop flitteth silken-sail'd" is a wildly romantic way to describe a passing sailboat. (Again, notice how the use of poetic devices here doesn't let the reader forget they're reading a *poem*. The heavy consonance, assonance, and sibilance of "the shallop flitteth silken-sail'd" are emphatically *crafted*.)

It's this drawing-back that makes the Lady seem all the more mysterious. With a heavy dose of wondering aporia, the speaker introduces the reader to the Lady, not with a direct look at her, but with a look at where one *never* sees her. Those who pass seem to know she's somewhere in the tower: but who has seen her? Who knows her? This works on much the same principle as holding off on showing the monster in a horror movie: the reapers and the sailors who pass by can imagine all sorts of wild things about this mysterious Lady, and so can the reader.

The reader is thus right there with the reaper when, as he gathers up his day's work under the light of the moon, he hears a song that flows out over the river. This song even seems to *follow* the river, or to *echo* the river; the Lady's singing is both taking and imitating the path to Camelot, even though (as the reader will soon discover) no other part of her is allowed to. Imitating and echoing will be major themes in the poem; already, they turn up stylistically in the diacope of "reapers, reaping early" and those never-ending refrains.

It also makes a lot of thematic sense that the reaper should recognize the Lady by *overhearing*, not by *seeing*. As the rest of the poem will prove, what you're not allowed to look at is often

the most enchanting thing of all.

LINES 37-45

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.

At last, the reader is granted a privilege the people going about their business around Shalott aren't allowed: the speaker shows them the Lady in her tower. All alone, she's eternally at work on a gorgeous tapestry.

As the poem moves into the Lady's castle, it leaves the realm of the natural behind and fully enters a world of magic and spells. The Lady's tapestry isn't just any old bit of weaving, but "a magic web with colours gay," bright, enchanted, and enchanting.

Just because the Lady is within this cloistered, spellbound world doesn't mean that she's its master, however. In an echo of the reaper's "whisper" in the previous stanza, "She has heard a whisper say / A curse is on her if she stay / To look down to Camelot" (39-41). (The sibilance of these lines sounds a lot like the whispering they describe.) But who whispered this? How did the Lady hear a whisper if she's always alone on Shalott, weaving away?

The Lady doesn't seem to know the answer any more than the reader does. Her response to her curse seems to be to simply believe in it, and weave on. But the whisper of a curse ties back in to the shivery, anxious-feeling trees around the island, and to the mystery of the Lady herself. Again, what's more frightening than a danger that you know is there, but can't see?

It's remarkable, too, that the Lady's curse should fall on her if she merely *looks* toward Camelot. Seeing seems to have special power in this world. The Lady is invisible to the outside world, and the outside world is invisible to her. All that she can know of the world, and all that the world can know of her, travels not by sight but by sound.

All this ghostly, haunted curse-whispering contrasts with the bright beauty of the Lady's tapestry, and the Lady's response to her curse seems to be to keep strictly to her work. But while the Lady is intensely focused on her weaving and has "little other care," "little" is not "no." The seeds of the Lady's destruction are already sown in that tiny flaw in her superhuman concentration.

LINES 46-54

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.

The weaving Lady doesn't only have her tapestry to keep her company. There's also a magic mirror, which gives her a strange, backwards window onto the world.

The mirror is both immediate and distancing. Its magic seems curiously focused: it shows her the landscape right around Shalott, the very landscape that she would see if she looked out her own forbidden window. The view this stanza presents is much like the view the speaker has just presented in the poem's first lines, and the things the Lady sees in her mirror are very ordinary. The river passes by, the common folk go about their business. But the mirror seems to cast a certain glamour over these daily things.

The introduction of this magic mirror is also the introduction of a major and ancient metaphor for art. The Lady's distant-yet-fascinated perspective on the world fits right in with the poem's portrait of her enchanted isolation: part of being an artist, the image of the mirror seems to suggest, is seeing the world *framed* and *reflected*, stepping outside the normal world to construct an image of it. (For more on mirrors, see the "Symbols" section.)

Recall, too, that mirrors tend to also show the face of the person who's looking into them. If the Lady appears in her own mirror, the speaker never tells readers so. There's the suggestion here that the artist's very *self* becomes a magic mirror; the artist sees through their own enchanted vision.

LINES 55-72

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.

As the enchanted mirror shows more of the world around Shalott, the reader begins to get a sense of what fascinates the Lady. There's a picturesque medieval central-casting roll call here: cheerful maidens, laid-back abbots (church officials), and handsome young lads, all on their way to Camelot, where the Lady can neither look nor go. Asyndeton helps this list to mirror the lady's experience of this ongoing procession of passers-by.

But the speaker wants the reader to pay special attention to a few specific figures that the Lady sees. In line 60, the speaker turns from this enumeration of charming Camelot citizens to remind the reader of mirror itself again. Now called "the mirror blue," its glass colored with a twilit enchantment, the mirror reasserts itself as a lens between the Lady and her visions. Having recalled the reader to the nature of the Lady's spellbound seeing, the speaker shows readers what she sees, and then draws back again to where she sits:

> And sometimes thro' the mirror blue
> The knights come riding two and two:
> She hath no loyal knight and true,
> The Lady of Shalott.

There's something particularly meaningful to the Lady, then, about these knights: they make her think of the love that her isolation precludes. The speaker drives this point home with the meaningful "But" that begins the next stanza. It is *in spite* of her longing for connection that the Lady still loves to weave her pictures of the shadow-world.

Then comes another meaningful conjunction: the "For" that leads into line 66:

> For often thro' the silent nights
> A funeral, with plumes and lights
> And music, went to Camelot

That "for" suggests that the Lady takes a special, consoling pleasure in weaving a picture of this solemn, elegant funeral. This is a rather sinister bit of foreshadowing: the Lady, so taken with the beauty of this procession of the dead, will make her own similar journey later.

But it's the last of the common sights in the mirror that finally spurs the Lady to speak.

> Or when the moon was overhead,
> Came two young lovers lately wed:
> "I am half sick of shadows," said
> The Lady of Shalott.

Once more, love seems to be the Lady's greatest temptation. Her artistic isolation in her tower precludes romance: she can only look on the happiness of others. But her poignant words, the first the reader has heard from her, express her ambivalence about her situation. She is pretty sick of shadows, to be sure, but not *completely* sick: only *half*-sick. Her artistry is itself an intense, obsessive, consuming love-affair.

More sound play continues throughout these stanzas. Note, for example, the sibilance of lines 71-72, with the /s/ and /sh/ sounds mimicking the hush of those "shadows" the Lady is "sick" of. Alliteration and consonance add to the poetic-feel of these lines, as in the shared /l/ of "lovers lately" in line 70. The /l/ sound also appears as consonance in the prior stanza, combined with the hard /c/ alliteration of "curly shepherd-lad," "crimson clad, and "Camelot."

LINES 73-90

> *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.*

The first two parts of the poem have established a world in tension between movement and stasis: the river running on, the people passing by, but the Lady forever in her spot, weaving away, making lasting pictures of transient things. The third part of the poem breaks this world's surface tension with a swift and powerful "bow-shot": an arrow, perhaps, from Cupid's bow, because it heralds the arrival of Sir Lancelot, riding through the fields around Shalott.

With an immediacy similar to the first line's introduction of the river, Lancelot appears at first only as "he." Just as the river feels something like an archetypal river, Lancelot is the ideal knight. In his first appearance, he's all light. His armor seems to burn in the sun; his horse's tack glitters like the galaxy itself; he's gorgeously encrusted with brass, silver, and gems. He is, in short, a total dreamboat—a vision of the perfect hero as he might appear in a fantasy, a lover written in the stars.

His shield bears special examination. Lancelot carries a shield that itself has an archetypal image of a knight on it, and not just any knight, but a knight who is the very picture of courtly love: "A red-cross knight for ever kneel'd / To a lady in his shield" (lines 78-79). Lancelot, seen through the Lady's mirror, is the

picture of a knight carrying the picture of a knight: an endless artistic reflection of chivalry and romantic perfection. That the knight on his shield kneels "for ever" ties right back into that tension between the unmoving eternity of art and the perpetually-moving real world.

What's more, Lancelot is musical. His horse wears jingling bells, he carries a silver bugle, and his very armor rings as he goes. He appeals to every sense available to the Lady (who, the reader may recall, is known to the outside world only by her singing), and in doing so reminds the reader that there are a few more animal senses the Lady absolutely isn't allowed to enjoy: taste, touch, and smell. But the mere sight and sound of Lancelot fill up her experience, to the point that she herself is even effaced from the story for a moment: "the Lady of Shalott" has predominated in the refrain over the past stanzas, but here the speaker turns back to "remote Shalott," the island.

Strong alliteration on /b/ and /g/ sounds in these stanzas mimics, not the tinkling of bells or the clip-clop of hooves, but the pounding of a heart. For example: "golden Galaxy," "bridle bells," "blazon'd baldric."

LINES 91-108

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.

The stanzas that follow lay on yet more imagery of celestial fire as Lancelot strolls by the Lady in her tower. Lancelot is all flames and stars; his helmet burns like a torch; even the horse he rides is polished and shining. The thick alliteration, assonance, and consonance of these stanzas add to the beauty of the imagery here. Note the lyrical /l/ and /f/ sounds, the bold /b/, and hard /c/; the /oo/ of "blue" and "jewelled," the short /eh/ throughout:

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,

The diacope and polyptoton of "helmet" and "[b]urn"/"burning" intensify the imagery further still.

The speaker's description of Lancelot as a "bearded meteor" is especially notable. There's a lot going on here: meteors could indeed be said to have "beards" when they trail light behind them, but to unite a beard and a meteor is to bring together the poetic and celestial with the earthy and manly.

Indeed, the earthly and manly creep to the fore in these stanzas. Previously, the Lady has been purely dazzled by Lancelot's knightly glory: he's sunlight and stars and armor and precious metals. Now his human glories come into play, too. By line 100, she's noticing his "broad clear brow"; by line 103, she's observed his "coal-black curls." It's notable that the *horse* comes up for description in line 101: the living, breathing, animal nature of the beast suggests the living, breathing, animal nature of the knight who rides it. Here, it's not just idealized romance that calls to the Lady, but plain sexuality.

And that sexuality literally calls, singing a siren song. When, in lines 107-108, Lancelot sings to himself, the sound of his voice is the last straw for the Lady, and that last straw is reflected in what happens to the refrain. "Shalott" is completely displaced by "Lancelot": the Lady's own home and identity have been pushed right out of the frame by the knight's overwhelming beauty.

It's no coincidence that Lancelot appears in the mirror "from the bank and from the river": he's coming to the Lady straight from the moving, forbidden current of natural life.

LINES 109-117

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.

Suddenly, the Lady herself is in quick motion. In a few speedy lines, rushed on by asyndeton, the Lady leaves her eternal station in front of the mirror and the tapestry and strides to her forbidden window.

What she sees there is curious. The first thing her eye falls on is not the gorgeous knight who's forced her from her seat, but "the water-lily bloom"—a turn of phrase that could either mean "the flower of the water-lily" or "the water-lily in the act of blooming." This is a vividly sexual image: the blooming flower, like the Lady, is newly awakened and opening up.

She sees, next, not all those coal-black curls, but "the helmet

and the plume," just the top of Lancelot's head—a partial glance from above, as compared to the lovingly direct look her mirror has given her. Finally, she sees Camelot itself, the place her curse has most explicitly forbidden her to look on.

Camelot is the culmination of all the Lady's looking. It's the place the river flows toward, the place Lancelot lives, and the place that all the boats and people she's seen passing by have gone. It represents the movement of human life itself—and looking at it spells doom for the Lady. Directly seeing the real world literally disenchants her.

Take a look at what happens with sound in the last part of this stanza, as soon as the Lady looks out her window:

> 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.

In this moment of artistic dissolution, all the Lady's known world falls apart at once. But even as the Lady's art fails, the *poem's* artifice intensifies. The destroyed tapestry (here an ensnaring "web," like a spider's) is represented with thick alliteration and consonance: repeating /fl/ and /w/ sounds alternate like the warp and weft of a weaving. And the onomatopoeic crack of the mirror is echoed in only the second line the Lady has spoken: "The curse is come upon me," cried / The Lady of Shalott."

Like Lancelot carrying his shield, the poem itself is an image of art as well as being a piece of art. The speaker's use of pronounced, musical sounds draws the reader's attention to the crafted nature of the poem at just the moment that the Lady's craft is spoiled.

Finally, the Lady is right back in her usual place in the refrain at line 117. Sir Lancelot's tenure in the center of her world has been brief, but fatal.

LINES 118-126

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.

The curse that has fallen on the Lady has destroyed her art and her magic mirror, but now that she's doomed, she's also free to go outside. What she finds there is rather different from what she's seen in the mirror so far.

The beautiful, sunny autumnal landscape that surrounded Lancelot has darkened. A storm-wind is blowing through, the rain is coming, the woods are yellowing and losing their leaves, and the river, personified, is even "complaining." All this foreshadows the lady's coming doom.

The idealized pastoral world that the Lady emerges into is suddenly a place of decay. Of course, it always has been: even in its beauty, autumn traditionally symbolizes waning and melancholy, and for good reason. Autumn is both a time of harvest and the transition into winter, and these are part of that cyclical, natural world that the Lady, on her isolated and static island, has so far been free from. Sexuality—the "bloom" that might lead to fruit—here leads only to death.

The Lady acts as if she knows exactly what to expect, though she had only the vaguest idea of the "curse" before it fell upon her. She finds a convenient boat under a willow—a tree not coincidentally associated with grief and mourning—and decorates the prow with her own name. It's as if she's making a final art piece with her own body, both titling and signing the boat that will carry her.

LINES 127-135

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.

Now on her boat, drifting downriver, the Lady can look toward Camelot all she wants. But she's not able to truly see it, let alone participate in it. Rather than admiring the lovely towers of the castle, she looks "with a glassy countenance"—that is, with an expression that resembles nothing so much as her own shattered mirror. Where in her tower the Lady could see the richness and fertility of the outside world (albeit only at a remove), from her boat she can only see like a "bold seër in a trance, / Seeing all his own mischance" (128-129). That is, the Lady is still seeing the world like a visionary, looking through a glass at things others can't see. But where once her vision gave her images of love and connection, now she sees nothing but the"mischance" of her own deadly fate.

Note how the sibilance of these lines creates a hushed, whispered tone, evocative of the Lady's trance-like state:

> Like some bold seër in a trance,
> Seeing all his own mischance—
> With a glassy countenance

When the Lady at last leaves her island, she does so in an

almost totally passive way. Her final action is to undo the chain that the boat is tethered with—literally freeing herself from Shalott. But afterward, she simply lies down and lets the river carry her. The river, moving endlessly along, is an image of both the stream of life (which the Lady can't participate in) and the pressure of fate (which the Lady can't evade).

LINES 136-153

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.

The Lady isn't quite done for yet. Her final act in life makes her an image in the scene she used to look out on through her mirror. Like the foreboding funeral boat in Part II, the Lady's boat moves downriver musically: she accompanies her own funeral procession with a song.

Light leaves the Lady as it has left the sky above her. She's dressed in "snowy white," the color of virgins and brides, but the gleam of fire associated with Sir Lancelot is gone, and her eyes are "darken'd wholly." She's dressed for a consummation she'll never reach, preserving an artistic purity that seems bound up with her sexual purity. But her *song* still has the power to connect.

The Lady's musical journey, like the songs she was known for in her tower, is overheard by those she passes. The speaker's perspective here moves around. First, the speaker puts the reader in the wondering ears of the citizens, who:

> Heard a carol, mournful, holy,
> Chanted loudly, chanted lowly,

This is itself a rhythmic and musical passage. Strong trochaic tetrameter pushing the sounds along like the river's current, while the diacope of "chanted" sounds like, well, a chant. The alliteration and consonance of /l/ sounds in "loudly" and "lowly" adds to the musical effect. The Lady isn't drifting along singing Bonnie Raitt to herself; she's singing a "carol," a holy hymn, even a prayer, underlining her virginal purity.

Next, the speaker moves in close for a view of the Lady as she lies dying in her boat. Here, the reader is even asked to enter the Lady's bodily experience, feeling how "her blood was frozen slowly"—a new intrusion of physical sensation into a world that has been all sights and sounds. Touch comes to the Lady only as the chill of death.

As in earlier stanzas, the relationship of the poem to its subject arises here. That the Lady's two art forms should be weaving and singing suggest that the speaker—a weaver of words and a singer of poetry—feels a particular connection with her plight. That the Lady dies "Singing in her song," the shared artistic fate of speaker and subject feel united: her singing envelops her in her own song, so that her art and her life seem inseparable.

The Lady's resultant insulation from the living world is so necessary a part of her artistry that she doesn't even make it to the "first house by the water-side"; even that much nearness to normal day-to-day life destroys her.

LINES 154-162

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.

At last, the speaker enters Camelot, the city that has been forbidden to the reader as much as the Lady all through the poem. It's a rich and elegant place, fronting the river with balconies and gardens and long pillared walks. It's also a place of down-to-earth commerce, the bustle of the day-to-day: when the crowds come out to see the Lady's body, they come out onto the "wharfs," where trade ships would come and go.

In this context, the arrival of the Lady's body seems to come as a shock, but also as a novelty. A crowd assembles to look at her: "knight and burgher, lord and dame," they represent a well-to-do and comfortable society. Among them, the Lady appears as an alien "gleaming shape." In death, she emits her own kind of light.

It's not the starry flaming quality of the vital Lancelot, however. Rather, it's a pale aura of holiness that suggests purity and sanctity. The Lady has become almost a virgin sacrifice. She has also, at last, fallen "silent." Only her body and her last writing have the power to communicate with the startled citizens now.

As has happened so often before, there's a mirroring quality between the real and the artificial here. The Lady of Shalott's body floats in a boat marked *The Lady of Shalott*, in a poem

called "The Lady of Shalott."

The poem also continues to call attention to its own artistry through devices like alliteration, assonance, and consonance. Take the /g/ of "garden wall and gallery [...] gleaming," the /h/ and long /i/ of "houses high / Silent," and the /ow/ of "round the prow."

LINES 163-171

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."

Camelot doesn't know what to do with the Lady's mysterious, shining body. The final stanza of the poem begins the citizens asking hushed questions: "Who is this? and what is here?" These are odd questions to ask, considering they've all just read the inscription around the prow of the Lady's boat which tells them exactly who this is! In spite of her best efforts to be *read* and understood, the dead Lady is not quite comprehensible to this society.

She does, however, shock all of Camelot into silence. King Arthur and his knights, partying nearby, fall quiet and cross themselves. In fact, their "royal cheer" is said to have "died"; while the Lady is not so fatal to the world as the world is to her, she's not without danger to bustling Camelot.

But there's a "But"—another significant conjunction, kicking off the last few lines of the poem. Lancelot is the only one of the crowd who can interact meaningfully with the Lady's corpse. In order to do so, he must "[muse] a little space"; the Lady, like her art, is not a part of this world, and can't be understood with just a surface glance.

Lancelot, of course, has no idea that the Lady met her doom because of him. But he does have some connection to the Lady's image-world that the people around him lack. He is, for one thing, the only named knight in this world of famous knights. Even the great Arthur is only present in the reader's mind because of the poem's allusions to his court. But here Lancelot is surrounded by anonymous knights, dames, and burghers—normal folk. In his role as a shining example of knighthood, he has some connection to the world of magic. And the representation of his own knightly virtues on his shield suggests that he is not totally unfamiliar with the double-vision of the artist.

Yet there's something inconclusive about Lancelot's brief tribute to the Lady. He refers only to her "lovely face," her beautiful exterior; the Lady's lush interior vision-world can't survive the journey into human connection and sexuality. At least Lancelot, unlike the people around him, is able to understand that the figure he sends up a conventional prayer for is "The Lady of Shalott."

SYMBOLS

WEAVING

The Lady's weaving is symbolic of the act of creating art. There's literal meaning as well as symbolic here, of course: the Lady is *actually* weaving, *actually* creating art. But Tennyson could have made her a painter or a musician or any sort of artist. So why *weaving*?

For one thing, weaving is a process of bringing many threads together into one big piece. Sometimes life itself is described as a "tapestry" for just this reason: it's made of all kinds of different things, brought together into a whole. One also needs to step back, remain at a distance, to see that "whole" and not just its individual threads—perhaps like the Lady must remain apart from the world in order to observe it.

The Lady's representations of the world she sees in the mirror—that is, the images she weaves—are thus symbolic of artistry generally, suggesting that the *method* of creating art represents life in the same way that the *subjects* of art might represent life. In other words, the *technique* she uses to make images of what she sees in the world is *itself* symbolic of the way that life works. (For more on art as a reflection, see the "Symbols" entry on mirrors.)

What's more, weaving is so common a symbol of storytelling and poetry-writing that it's become almost invisible: when someone says that a storyteller "weaves a yarn," it might take a listener a moment to remember that that's a metaphor! Weaving thus links Tennyson to his heroine. She's using threads, he's using lines, but both are trying to create a picture of the world as they see it.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 37-38:** "There she weaves by night and day / A magic web with colours gay."
- **Line 43:** "And so she weaveth steadily,"
- **Lines 64-65:** "But in her web she still delights / To weave the mirror's magic sights,"
- **Line 109:** "She left the web, she left the loom,"
- **Line 114:** "Out flew the web and floated wide;"

THE MIRROR

Mirrors have long been associated with magic, with the self, and with the complexity of truth. All of these symbolic connotations are present in the poem.

The word "reflect" comes from Latin roots that mean "to bend back." A mirror's job is to bend back light, returning an image to the viewer. That image is at once a reflection—or shadow, to use the Lady's term—of a real thing, *and* a thing in itself. If weaving in the poem represents the process of creating art and the distanced required to do so, then the mirror symbolizes art itself. Art, like a mirror, the poem suggests, is a reflection, a way of seeing something without looking at it directly. It's a truth *and* a falsehood at the same time.

It's also worth noting that one of the big things a person sees upon looking into a mirror is *themselves*. The Lady's interpretation of the world is transmitted through a picture that is also her own image. This makes line 108, where "Sir Lancelot" uniquely replaces "Shalott," especially powerful: the sight of the beautiful knight displaces the Lady from her own place at the center of her image-world. (See the Rhyme Scheme section and the Devices entry on refrains for more about this important moment.)

When the Lady looks into her magic mirror and weaves what she sees there, she's making an image of an image. But making *any* kind of art is making an image of an image. Artists perceive the world through their own "mirror," their own frame of reference; then they represent what they see. In this way, the mirror further suggests the inherent *subjectivity* of art—that it is inevitably a reflection (no pun intended) of the artist's own perception of the world.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 46-48:** "And moving thro' a mirror clear / That hangs before her all the year, / Shadows of the world appear."
- **Line 60:** "And sometimes thro' the mirror blue"
- **Lines 64-65:** "But in her web she still delights / To weave the mirror's magic sights,"
- **Lines 105-106:** "From the bank and from the river / He flash'd into the crystal mirror,"
- **Line 115:** "The mirror crack'd from side to side;"

SIR LANCELOT

Sir Lancelot is one of the most famous knights of King Arthur's Round Table: Arthur's closest friend, and his finest warrior. In this poem, he carries complex symbolic weight, representing not only all the social virtues of chivalry, but also concentrated masculine sexuality. That said, his well-known legend, in which he betrayed Arthur by having an affair with Queen Guinevere, also suggests that there's a sting in the tail of these attractive qualities.

When the Lady is instantly smitten by the sight of Lancelot in her mirror, the handsome knight is described first by his armor, and then by his physical loveliness. The armor makes him a romantic figure, a literal knight in shining armor who burns with light like a star. His gear even represents an idealized courtly love through the image on his shield of a knight kneeling to a lady.

In spite of this hint of trouble to come, Lancelot *appears* to be the very picture of the "loyal knight and true" the Lady is said to lack in line 62, his armor presenting him as both a protector and a lover. The Lady can only glimpse his actual body through this symbolic armor, but what she sees is pretty fetching: flowing coal-black locks and a broad handsome brow, suggesting plenty of manly attractions under all that metal. Lancelot is also musical, singing to himself and carrying a bugle. He thus appeals to every sense available to the lady through the mirror, while she's denied the animal pleasures of touch, smell, and taste.

He's a symbol of everything a chivalrous knight is meant to be to a woman, while also concealing the warning that this gorgeous image can't survive life as it's really lived. This isn't to say that his beauties are all an illusion. Lancelot *is* a great knight, and indeed, he's the only knight who rises to the occasion with words of pity and blessing when the Lady's corpse floats into Camelot.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 73-108:** "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."
- **Lines 168-171:** "But Lancelot mused a little space; / He said, "She has a lovely face; / God in his mercy lend her grace, / The Lady of Shalott.""

CAMELOT

In brief, Camelot symbolizes the distractions of the real world beyond the Lady's tower/mirror. King Arthur's court at Camelot is a place of life. It's bustling, rich, and populous, full of beautiful towers and well-to-do citizens. But it's also a place that doesn't really know what to do with someone like the Lady of Shalott. In fact, contact with this busy world kills her.

Camelot is, of course, highly romantic, a city of knights and chivalry. But it's also a place of politics, commerce, family, partying, eating, drinking, and sex: the "real world" that, as an artist, the Lady is forever forbidden from entering.

Sir Lancelot is a paragon of all the virtues and pleasures that Camelot symbolizes, and looking directly at him—coming into contact with physical life and sexuality—destroys the delicate, magical distance that the Lady needs in order to *represent* his world. Camelot is gorgeous, but mysteriously destructive to the art that would portray it.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "many-tower'd Camelot;"
- **Line 14:** "Flowing down to Camelot."
- **Line 23:** "Skimming down to Camelot:"
- **Line 32:** "Down to tower'd Camelot:"
- **Line 41:** "To look down to Camelot."
- **Line 50:** "Winding down to Camelot:"
- **Line 59:** "Goes by to tower'd Camelot;"
- **Line 68:** "And music, went to Camelot:"
- **Line 86:** "As he rode down to Camelot:"
- **Line 95:** "As he rode down to Camelot."
- **Line 104:** "As he rode down to Camelot."
- **Line 113:** "She look'd down to Camelot."
- **Line 122:** "Over tower'd Camelot;"
- **Line 131:** "Did she look to Camelot."
- **Line 140:** "She floated down to Camelot:"
- **Line 149:** "Turn'd to ," "tower'd Camelot."
- **Lines 154-162:** "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."
- **Lines 164-167:** "the lighted palace near / Died the sound of royal cheer; / And they cross'd themselves for fear, / All the knights at Camelot:"

AUTUMN AND THE HARVEST

Autumn in the poem symbolizes all the sumptuous real-world distractions in which the Lady cannot partake, yet which the poem also implies are linked to death and decay. It further suggests the fleeting nature of the world's sensual delights.

"The Lady of Shalott" is set in the fullest, richest part of early autumn, when the harvest is coming in, the air is cooling, and the sky is bright blue. But as John Keats will tell you, if autumn is a season of fruitfulness, it's also a season of melancholy: perfect ripeness that's just about to tip over into overripeness, then rot, then winter's death. The poem's talk of reapers might remind the reader that the most famous of reapers is the Grim one.

The Lady can't enter an autumnal world herself and survive. Shalott is covered in summer lilies; her artistic world is preserved in a timeless stasis. Things never change, but that also means they never die. As soon as she breaks from her work to look out her window, autumn shows its more ominous face. When she leaves the tower, a storm is brewing, and the yellow leaves of the woods are being torn away in the winds.

The poem's autumnal setting thus links to the world of Camelot. Coming in contact with life, sex, fullness, and ripeness also inevitably means coming in contact with death.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "On either side the river lie / Long fields of barley and of rye, / That clothe the wold and meet the sky;"
- **Lines 10-11:** "Willows whiten, aspens quiver, / Little breezes dusk and shiver"
- **Lines 28-29:** "reapers, reaping early / In among the bearded barley,"
- **Lines 33-34:** "the reaper weary, / Piling sheaves in uplands airy,"
- **Lines 118-122:** "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;"

FLOWERS

If autumn and the harvest represent a sort of over-ripeness as well as the connection between sensuality and decay, then flowers essentially represent the opposite in the poem. They are symbolic of youth, purity, and unspoiled fertility—on both an artistic and a sexual level.

Flowers are often associated with these things—think of phrases like "the bloom of youth," which connotes a sense of fertile freshness. Here, that bloom is, at least on one level, connected to the creation of art.

Recall that the poem is often read as being an extended metaphor for the isolation of the artist. That the "silent isle" surrounding the Lady is "a space of flowers" and "where the lilies blow" suggests that Shalott, in its separation from the decay of the rest of the world, is a place of creative abundance.

The Lady is directly tied to this landscape—she is, after all, known only as "The Lady of Shalott"—and thus is linked with fertility as well. Indeed, she is fertile in the sense that she weaves—creates—"night and day." She is also artistically *pure* in the sense of being free from worldly distractions that might cloud her ability to create truthful art.

Of course, there are sexual undertones here too. The poem can also be read as about the dangers of temptation and specifically as a response to Victorian attitudes about women's sexuality (in Tennyson's era, women were expected to remain chaste and virginal until marriage). Surrounded by summer lilies, the Lady is chaste and pure and youthful, filled with life and promise, uncorrupted by the outside world.

Yet once she gives into temptation and looks at Lancelot, that embodiment of masculine sexuality, she sees "the water-lily bloom"—basically, reach sexual maturity. And what comes after blooming? Death. That's why, upon leaving Shalott, a storm brews and leaves—dead plant matter—begin to fall on the Lady, suggesting that she is no longer fertile nor pure. Indeed, the warmth required for flowers to grow disappears entirely as the Lady's "blood" freezes, and she dies. As the saying goes, the bloom is off the rose.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "Gazing where the lilies blow"
- **Line 16:** "Overlook a space of flowers,"
- **Line 111:** "She saw the water-lily bloom,"

FIRE AND LIGHT

Fire—and the light and warmth it creates—represents vivacity and sexuality. The fire symbolism in the poem is thus closely connected to Sir Lancelot—who, as previously noted in this guide, is the embodiment of masculinity, chivalry, and sexual temptation.

Note how whenever Lancelot is described, he is linked with heat and light: the "dazzling" sunlight that shines down on him seems to set his "brazen greaves" (basically his shin guards) aflame; his shield "sparkle[s]"; his "gemmy bridle glitter[s]" like "stars"—a.k.a. giant balls of fire—in the "golden Galaxy"; and both his helmet and the feather atop it burn "like one burning flame." He moves through the dark night like a "meteor, trailing light" and his brow "glow[s]" in the sunshine. Even his dark curls are linked to fire, described as being black as "coal"—something burned for fuel. He is positively brimming with light—with life and lust.

All these references to fire and light further reflect his inescapable allure, the way the Lady feels pulled towards his figure. She positively *burns* for him—but gets too close to the flame. In the end, the lady's blood freezes and her eyes darken as she dies, the fire of life leaving her forever.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 75-77:** "The sun came dazzling thro' the leaves, / And flamed upon the brazen greaves / Of bold Sir Lancelot."
- **Lines 79-80:** "his shield, / That sparkled on the yellow field,"
- **Lines 82-84:** "The gemmy bridle glitter'd free, / Like to some branch of stars we see / Hung in the golden Galaxy."
- **Lines 93-94:** "The helmet and the helmet-feather / Burn'd like one burning flame together,"
- **Lines 97-98:** "Below the starry clusters bright, / Some bearded meteor, trailing light,"
- **Line 100:** "His broad clear brow in sunlight glow'd;"
- **Line 103:** "His coal-black curls as on he rode,"
- **Lines 147-148:** "Till her blood was frozen slowly, / And her eyes were darken'd wholly,"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is a common device in poetry, and it draws attention to itself; the more alliterative a poem gets, the more deliberately *crafted* it feels. The heavy use of alliteration in "The Lady of Shalott" (so heavy we haven't marked anything close to every instance of it in this guide) thus fits right in with the poem's interest in the nature of art itself. All those repeated sounds never let the reader forget that they're reading a *poem*, woven artfully from words as the Lady's tapestry is woven artfully from threads.

There's a particularly strong example in the first stanza of Part II, lines 37-45, where the speaker first introduces the Lady to the reader directly. These lines use heavy alliteration on the /w/ sound with words like "weave," "web," and "whisper," linking together the hushed secrecy of the curse with the repetitive hushed sounds of weaving. The poem here also uses hard /k/ sounds to connect the tapestry's "colours" with the Lady's "curse," and with "Camelot" itself. Here, alliteration evokes the rhythmic, repetitive quiet of the Lady's weaving, and at the same time gives the reader the sense that the Lady's artistic gifts and her curse of isolation are tangled up together. The echoing sounds are both evocative and meaningful.

Something similar happens in the beginning of Part III, when Sir Lancelot makes his appearance. Lines 73-108 are riddled with alliterative /b/, /g/, and /r/ sounds: the "gemmy bridle" that "glitter'd" like a "branch" of the "golden Galaxy" is just one example. The description of the knight is seductively gorgeous, but the sounds are punchy, evoking both the knight's effect on the Lady and his eventual effect on her magic mirror. Lancelot's beauty is a full-force KO, and its sounds echo its power.

In other moments alliteration evokes the imagery or content of a line. Take the hard /k/ sounds of line 115-116:

> The mirror crack'd from side to side;
> "The curse is come upon me," cried

These sounds are loud and harsh, evoking the smashing of the mirror and suddenness of the curse as it hits the doomed Lady. There is also a great deal of sibilant alliteration in the poem, discussed in a separate entry in this guide.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** “Willows,” “ ,” “whiten”
- **Line 16:** “space”
- **Line 17:** “silent”
- **Line 19:** “willow”
- **Line 22:** “silken-sail'd”
- **Line 23:** “Skimming”
- **Line 24:** “seen”
- **Line 25:** “seen,” “stand”
- **Line 26:** “land”
- **Line 27:** “Lady,” “Shalott”
- **Line 28:** “reapers,” “reaping”
- **Line 29:** “bearded barley”
- **Line 31:** “clearly”
- **Line 32:** “Camelot”
- **Line 37:** “weaves”
- **Line 38:** “web,” “colours”
- **Line 39:** “whisper”
- **Line 40:** “curse”
- **Line 41:** “Camelot”
- **Line 42:** “curse”
- **Line 43:** “she,” “weaveth,” “steadily”
- **Line 44:** “little,” “care,” “she”
- **Line 45:** “Lady,” “Shalott”
- **Line 46:** “moving,” “mirror”
- **Line 56:** “An,” “an,” “ ,” “ambling”
- **Line 57:** “curly”
- **Line 58:** “crimson,” “ ,” “clad”
- **Line 59:** “Camelot”
- **Line 65:** “mirror's magic,” “sights”
- **Line 66:** “silent”
- **Line 70:** “lovers lately”
- **Line 71:** “sick,” “shadows,” “said”
- **Line 72:** “Shalott”
- **Line 73:** “bow-shot,” “bower-eaves”
- **Line 74:** “between,” “barley-sheaves”
- **Line 76:** “brazen”
- **Line 77:** “bold”
- **Line 78:** “knight,” “kneel'd”
- **Line 82:** “gemmy,” “bridle,” “glitter'd”
- **Line 83:** “branch”
- **Line 84:** “golden Galaxy”
- **Line 85:** “ bridle bells”
- **Line 87:** “blazon'd baldric”
- **Line 88:** “bugle”
- **Line 89:** “rode,” “rung”
- **Line 90:** “remote”
- **Line 100:** “broad,” “ clear ,” “brow”
- **Line 101:** “burnish'd”
- **Line 103:** “coal-black curls”
- **Line 104:** “Camelot”
- **Line 108:** “Sang Sir”
- **Line 114:** “web,” “wide”
- **Line 115:** “crack'd”
- **Line 116:** “curse,” “come,” “cried”

ALLUSION

"The Lady of Shalott" expects that its reader will know the basics of Arthurian legend. The poem's allusions to the stories of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table place the poem in a world with its own rules—rules that aren't quite like those of the everyday world. Camelot, where Arthur and his knights lived, is a legendary English landscape of dragons, ladies, castles, and magic.

The poem as a whole is one big allusion, in fact: it draws its plot from a medieval Italian story, "La Damigella de Scalot," which tells the tale of Elaine of Astolat, who falls in unrequited love with Lancelot.

Tennyson also expects that the reader won't need any more introduction to Sir Lancelot than the Lady herself gets. While the poem spends plenty of time describing Sir Lancelot's shining armor and general manly beauty, it expects its reader already to know more about this noble knight than it tells them directly. The reader who's familiar with their Arthurian legend will be aware that Lancelot is off-limits to the Lady of Shalott for more than one reason: he's already in love with Queen Guinevere, King Arthur's wife.

Tennyson's use of Arthurian allusion here doesn't just provide the meat of his poem's story, but a whole atmosphere: solemn, beautiful, courtly, chivalrous, and sad. But there's also a nod to the philosophical in the Lady's sigh that she is "half-sick of shadows" in line 71. The "shadows" the Lady speaks of raise the ghost of Plato, the Greek philosopher who taught that the things of this world are mere shadows on a cave wall, cast by the true forms moving outside the cave. When the Lady leaps up to look at Lancelot, she sees a vision of reality too bright to survive.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-5:** “ To many-tower'd / ;”
- **Line 5:** “Camelot”
- **Line 14:** “ Flowing down to Camelot.”

- **Line 23:** “ Skimming down to Camelot:”
- **Line 32:** “ Down to tower'd Camelot:”
- **Line 41:** “ To look down to Camelot.”
- **Line 50:** “ Winding down to Camelot:”
- **Line 59:** “ ,” “Goes by to tower'd Camelot;”
- **Line 68:** “And music, went to Camelot:”
- **Lines 71-72:** ““I am half sick of shadows," said / The Lady of Shalott.”
- **Lines 76-79:** “And flamed upon the brazen greaves / Of bold / . / A red-cross knight for ever kneel'd / To a lady in his shield,”
- **Line 77:** “Sir Lancelot”
- **Lines 82-89:** “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,”
- **Lines 91-95:** “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.”
- **Lines 100-108:** “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.”
- **Line 113:** “ She look'd down to Camelot.”
- **Line 122:** “ Over tower'd Camelot;”
- **Line 131:** “ Did she look to Camelot.”
- **Line 140:** “ She floated down to Camelot:”
- **Line 149:** “ Turn'd to tower'd Camelot.”
- **Line 158:** “ Silent into Camelot.”
- **Line 160:** “Knight and burgher, lord and dame,”
- **Line 167:** “ All the knights at Camelot:”
- **Lines 168-171:** “But Lancelot mused a little space; / He said, "She has a lovely face; / God in his mercy lend her grace, / The Lady of Shalott."”

APORIA

Aporia appears in only two places in "The Lady of Shalott": a few lines toward the end of Part I, and a few lines at the very end of the poem. But those brief moments do a lot to evoke the mystery and magic that hover around the Lady's enchanted island.

The first instance of aporia comes early in the poem. The speaker has been slowly zooming in on the island of Shalott, moving from the fields to the river to the island to the tower. But that zoom pulls right back out again as soon as the reader first hears the Lady named, returning the poem's attention to the river and the boats that travel down it.

Then, in lines 24-27, comes the aporia:

> 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?

This sequence of questions emphasize the Lady's enigmatic enchantment. The people living and working in the fields around her island know she's there—but who's ever seen her? By introducing the Lady through curiosity about what she *hasn't* been seen doing, the speaker creates a sense of mystery, doubt, and isolation. This Lady only exists to the outside world as a distant, haunting voice, and as a question.

Aporia returns when the Lady at last makes her way into the outside world—though, alas, she doesn't make it alive. Questions arise again in line 163, the first line of the last stanza:

> Who is this? and what is here?

Again, the people marvel at the Lady, though this time, she's right there for all to see. The sight of her body doesn't unravel her mystery for them; she's just as isolated in death as she was in life.

Where Aporia appears in the poem:

- **Lines 24-27:** “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?”
- **Line 163:** “Who is this? and what is here?”

ASSONANCE

"The Lady of Shalott" is rich with assonance—so rich that we've only marked it here in the first part of the poem! There's plenty more to find; assonance, like consonance and alliteration, never lets the reader forget that this is a *poem*, a *crafted* work of art. The lines are intensely melodic and lyrical, elevating the story at hand.

There's also assonance aplenty here simply because of the poem's rhyme scheme (covered in its own section in this guide), which lines up long runs of words with similar or related sounds. Words that rhyme are naturally assonant, and this assonance is often echoed by other words in a line. Take lines 10-11, where the short /ih/ sounds of the end-rhymes find echoes earlier in the lines as well:

> Willows whiten, aspens quiver,
> Little breezes dusk and shiver

This lends the lines a sense of cohesion and unity. The same sound pops up in the next stanza as well, its lightness subtly evoking the gentle movements of boats as they "flit" along the

water:

> The shallop flitteth silken-sail'd
> Skimming down to Camelot:

Why might the speaker use such insistent, repeating patterns of vowel sounds? One reason might be the way that they echo the poem's images and themes. The repetitions of vowel sounds and even whole words, especially the way these repetitions thread through other patterns of sound, have two of the poem's biggest images baked right in: weaving and mirroring.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "either side," "lie"
- **Line 2:** "rye"
- **Line 3:** "clothe," "wold," "sky"
- **Line 4:** "by"
- **Line 6:** "go"
- **Line 7:** "blow"
- **Line 8:** "below"
- **Line 10:** "Willows," "quiver"
- **Line 11:** "Little," "shiver"
- **Line 12:** "ever"
- **Line 13:** "By," "island," "river"
- **Line 15:** "gray," "gray," "towers"
- **Line 16:** "space," "flowers"
- **Line 17:** "silent isle," "imbowers"
- **Line 19:** "By," "margin," "willow," "veil'd"
- **Line 20:** "Slide," "barges," "trail'd"
- **Line 21:** "By," "unhail'd"
- **Line 22:** "flitteth," " silken," "sail'd"
- **Line 23:** "Skimming"
- **Line 24:** "wave," "hand"
- **Line 25:** "casement," "stand"
- **Line 26:** "land"
- **Line 28:** "reapers," "reaping," " early"
- **Line 29:** "In," "bearded," " barley"
- **Line 30:** "Hear," "cheerly"
- **Line 31:** "clearly"
- **Line 32:** "Down," "tower'd"
- **Line 33:** "reaper," "weary"
- **Line 34:** "sheaves," "airy"
- **Line 35:** "Listening," "whispers," "Tis," "fairy"

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton appears fairly often in "The Lady of Shalott," and often helps the poem's movement match what it describes. For instance, in lines 10-11, when "Willows whiten, aspens quiver, / Little breezes dusk and shiver," the lack of conjunctions works with the lines' alliteration and rhyme to evoke the delicate, constant motions of nature around Shalott.

Something similar (though rather more ominous) happens in lines 118-122, when those same little breezes that were gently going about their business at the beginning of the poem get a lot wilder after the Lady's curse takes effect:

> The pale yellow woods were waning,
> The broad stream in his banks complaining,

The asyndeton here evokes the rapid chaos that ensues after the curse falls upon the Lady.

Asyndeton can also create a sense of something piling up, which is exactly what happens in lines 55-57. Here, the speaker evokes all the colorful characters the lady sees through her mirror but can't look at directly:

> Sometimes a troop of damsels glad,
> An abbot on an ambling pad,
> Sometimes a curly shepherd-lad,

Perhaps the most powerful moment of asyndeton in the poem comes in lines 109-113, where the Lady finally stands up from her loom and rushes to her window to look directly at Lancelot. Here, asyndeton (and also parataxis) mirrors the Lady's urgent movement, and rushes her toward her inevitable doom:

> 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.

This is the longest uninterrupted stretch of asyndeton in the poem, and it mimics both the physical and the emotional power of the moment. The rapid-fire sentences and anaphora create whiplash, evoking the Lady's "pac[ing]" and building suspense as the Lady abandons her weaving in order to look outside.

These lines also can be taken as an example of climax, as the lines build in importance—from the Lady turning away from her weaving and then from the loom itself, before walking across the room, seeing the river, then seeing Lancelot's helmet, and then, finally, seeing the city of Camelot itself.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-11:** "Willows whiten, aspens quiver, / Little breezes dusk and shiver"
- **Lines 55-57:** "Sometimes a troop of damsels glad, / An abbot on an ambling pad, / Sometimes a curly shepherd-lad,"
- **Lines 109-113:** "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."
- **Lines 118-122:** "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;"
- **Lines 136-139:** "Lying, robed in snowy white / That loosely flew to left and right— / The leaves upon her falling light— / Thro' the noises of the night"
- **Lines 145-146:** "Heard a carol, mournful, holy, / Chanted loudly, chanted lowly,"

CAESURA

The strange, flowing lines of "The Lady of Shalott" break into caesuras only occasionally. Caesura is most prominent in the first part of the poem, where the swing of mid-line breaks at first evokes the steady rhythms of the life around the Lady's tower, and then marks a moment of wonder, when the reaper:

> Listening, whispers "'Tis the fairy
> Lady of Shalott."

In those few places where caesura appears in the rest of the poem, it's almost always drawing rhythmic attention to something important. Just as caesura literally "arrests" the line, stopping it in its tracks for a moment, these breaks ask the reader to pause and give these moments a little extra care.

One of the most meaningful of these powerful caesuras comes in line 109, when the Lady, finally overcome by Lancelot's beauty, leaps up and rushes to the window. Here, the caesura works alongside asyndeton to evoke the Lady's abrupt, shocking urgency:

> She left the web, she left the loom,

Caesura also plays a subtler and more ominous role at times—for example, when readers learn about one of the many things the Lady sees in her mirror in lines 67-68 Sometimes, as she watches:

> A funeral, with plumes and lights
> And music, went to Camelot:

This funeral barge, detailed in all its pomp, is slowed down by the caesuras, pushing the reader to linger for a moment on the image. Not coincidentally, this moment foreshadows the lady's own death: she, too, will make her musical way downriver in a boat.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "Willows whiten, aspens quiver,"
- **Line 15:** "Four gray walls, and four gray towers,"
- **Line 19:** "By the margin, willow veil'd,"
- **Line 21:** "By slow horses; and unhail'd"
- **Line 28:** "Only reapers, reaping early"
- **Line 35:** "Listening, whispers " 'Tis the fairy"
- **Line 67:** "A funeral, with plumes and lights"
- **Line 68:** " And music, went to Camelot:"
- **Line 107:** ""Tirra lirra," by the river"
- **Line 109:** "She left the web, she left the loom,"
- **Line 136:** "Lying, robed in snowy white"
- **Line 145:** "Heard a carol, mournful, holy,"
- **Line 146:** "Chanted loudly, chanted lowly,"
- **Line 163:** "Who is this? and what is here?"

CONSONANCE

The poem is rich with consonance, a few examples of which we've highlighted in this guide. Like its cousins alliteration and assonance, consonance helps to create a woven pattern of sound that matches the poem's theme of enchanted artistry. The very word "enchanted" here might provide a clue as to how these sound patterns work: it comes from a Latin root, *cantare*, that means "to sing," and musical sounds can indeed put a listener under a spell. In short, all this sonic repetition simply makes the poem sound pleasing and intoxicating.

Consider, for instance, the way that consonance on /l/ sounds helps to lead the reader up to the island in the first stanza. Consonance on /l/ creates a sense of matching and echoing through all kinds of words here: "fields," "clothe," "lilies"—and, not coincidentally, "Camelot." (These subtle, repeating interior /l/ sounds will recur through the poem as another piece of the sonic connection between "Camelot," "Lancelot," and "Shalott.")

Not long after, in line 22, the line "the shallop flitteth silken-sail'd" provides a lovely example of how such linked sounds can create atmosphere: those lapping /l/ sounds are like the movement of the river-water.

Consonance is a relatively subtle effect, but it's all over the place in this poem. In one particularly heightened moment—the Lady's rush to the window, and its terrible consequences—/r/, /w/, /l/, and /m/ sounds come in a rush, accompanied by intense alliteration on the harsh /k/ sounds that mimic cracking glass:

> 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.

This density of similar sounds intensifies the drama of this already-dramatic scene, and reminds the reader of the relationship between the poem and its subject. In the moment that the Lady breaks her spell and her mirror, the artistic spell on the poem's reader only heightens.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "lie"
- **Line 2:** "Long ," "fields," "barley"
- **Line 3:** "clothe," "wold"
- **Line 4:** "field"
- **Line 5:** "Camelot"
- **Line 7:** "lilies," " ," "blow"
- **Line 8:** "island," "below"
- **Line 9:** "island," "Shalott"
- **Line 10:** "Willows"
- **Line 11:** "Little"
- **Line 13:** "island"
- **Line 14:** "Flowing," "Camelot"
- **Line 16:** "Overlook," "flowers"
- **Line 17:** "silent isle"
- **Line 18:** "Lady," "Shalott"
- **Line 19:** "willow veil'd,"
- **Line 20:** "Slide," "trail'd"
- **Line 21:** "slow," "unhail'd"
- **Line 22:** "shallop," "flitteth"
- **Lines 22-22:** " / silken-sail'd"
- **Line 23:** "Camelot"
- **Line 26:** "land"
- **Line 27:** "Lady," "Shalott"
- **Line 109:** "left," "left," "loom"
- **Line 110:** "thro," "room"
- **Line 111:** "saw," "water," "bloom"
- **Line 112:** "saw," "helmet," "plume"
- **Line 113:** "look'd," "Camelot"
- **Line 114:** "flew," "web," "floated," "wide"
- **Line 115:** "mirror"
- **Line 117:** "Lady," "Shalott"

END-STOPPED LINE

End-stopped lines do several things in "The Lady of Shalott": they create drama, momentum, and symbolic separations between the Lady and the world.

More emphatic end-stops, in the form of periods or semicolons, often appear in the endlessly repeating refrains at the middle and end of each stanza (that is, those lines that usually end with "Camelot" or "Shalott"). While there's a little more variation in the middle of the stanzas, every stanza but one ends with a period. This creates a pause, a moment of finality, in the middle and end of each stanza.

Lighter end-stops, in the form of commas, also tend to appear just before the final line of each stanza, which means that the words "the Lady of Shalott"—like the Lady herself—are almost always cut off from their surroundings, separated out by sound as well as space.

Near the end of Part 1 of the poem, end stops arrive in the form of question marks:

> 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?

This passage introduces the mystery of the Lady, whom the reader (like the reapers who wonder about her) still hasn't seen directly. These questioning end-stops bring with them the lilting upward sound of curiosity.

In contrast, the bulk of the end-stopped concluding lines of the stanza use a period, like this:

> And sometimes thro' the mirror blue
> The knights come riding two and two:
> She hath no loyal knight and true,
> The Lady of Shalott.

Read this out loud, and notice how different this sounds to the line that ends with a question mark. Over and over, the stanzas come back to the gentle bump of a period—a definite ending. Alongside the wheel-like turning of the words "Camelot," "Lancelot," and "Shalott," these little endings give the reader a sense of inevitability—even of doom. They reflect the law of inevitability that governs the poem: give someone in a fairy tale a rule, and they're going to break it.

But the lighter end-stops of commas also play an important role in pacing the poem. Consider lines 109-113:

> 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.

Here, commas separate out the events of the Lady's fatal rush to the window, helping to give each of her movements weight while also preserving a sense of quick motion.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "sky;"
- **Line 5:** "Camelot;"
- **Line 6:** "go,"
- **Line 8:** "below,"
- **Line 9:** "Shalott."
- **Line 10:** "quiver,"
- **Line 14:** "Camelot."
- **Line 16:** "flowers,"
- **Line 18:** "Shalott."
- **Line 19:** "veil'd,"
- **Line 23:** "Camelot:"
- **Line 24:** "hand?"

- **Line 25:** “stand?”
- **Line 26:** “land,”
- **Line 27:** “Shalott?”
- **Line 32:** “Camelot:”
- **Line 33:** “weary,”
- **Line 34:** “airy,”
- **Line 36:** “Shalott."”
- **Line 38:** “gay.”
- **Line 41:** “Camelot.”
- **Line 42:** “be,”
- **Line 43:** “steadily,”
- **Line 44:** “she,”
- **Line 45:** “Shalott.”
- **Line 48:** “appear.”
- **Line 50:** “Camelot:”
- **Line 51:** “whirls,”
- **Line 52:** “village-churls,”
- **Line 54:** “ Shalott.”
- **Line 55:** “glad,”
- **Line 56:** “pad,”
- **Line 57:** “shepherd-lad,”
- **Line 59:** “Camelot;”
- **Line 61:** “two:”
- **Line 62:** “true,”
- **Line 63:** “Shalott.”
- **Line 65:** “sights,”
- **Line 68:** “Camelot:”
- **Line 69:** “overhead,”
- **Line 70:** “wed:”
- **Line 72:** “Shalott.”
- **Line 73:** “bower-eaves,”
- **Line 74:** “barley-sheaves,”
- **Line 75:** “leaves,”
- **Line 77:** “Lancelot.”
- **Line 81:** “Shalott.”
- **Line 84:** “Galaxy.”
- **Line 86:** “Camelot:”
- **Line 88:** “hung,”
- **Line 89:** “rung,”
- **Line 90:** “Shalott.”
- **Line 92:** “saddle-leather,”
- **Line 94:** “together,”
- **Line 95:** “Camelot.”
- **Line 96:** “night,”
- **Line 97:** “bright,”
- **Line 99:** “Shalott.”
- **Line 100:** “glow'd;”
- **Line 101:** “trode;”
- **Line 103:** “rode,”
- **Line 104:** “Camelot.”
- **Line 106:** “mirror,”
- **Line 108:** “Lancelot.”
- **Line 109:** “loom,”
- **Line 110:** “room,”
- **Line 111:** “bloom,”
- **Line 112:** “plume,”
- **Line 113:** “Camelot.”
- **Line 114:** “wide;”
- **Line 115:** “side;”
- **Line 117:** “Shalott.”
- **Line 118:** “straining,”
- **Line 119:** “waning,”
- **Line 120:** “complaining,”
- **Line 122:** “Camelot;”
- **Line 124:** “afloat,”
- **Line 126:** “Shalott.”
- **Line 128:** “trance,”
- **Line 129:** “mischance—”
- **Line 131:** “Camelot.”
- **Line 133:** “ lay;”
- **Line 134:** “away,”
- **Line 135:** “Shalott.”
- **Line 137:** “right—”
- **Line 138:** “light—”
- **Line 140:** “Camelot:”
- **Line 142:** “among,”
- **Line 143:** “song,”
- **Line 144:** “Shalott.”
- **Line 145:** “holy,”
- **Line 146:** “lowly,”
- **Line 147:** “slowly,”
- **Line 148:** “wholly,”
- **Line 149:** “Camelot.”
- **Line 151:** “water-side,”
- **Line 152:** “died,”
- **Line 153:** “Shalott.”
- **Line 154:** “balcony,”
- **Line 155:** “gallery,”
- **Line 156:** “by,”
- **Line 157:** “high,”
- **Line 158:** “Camelot.”
- **Line 159:** “came,”
- **Line 160:** “dame,”
- **Line 161:** “name,”
- **Line 162:** “Shalott.”
- **Line 163:** “here?”
- **Line 165:** “cheer;”
- **Line 166:** “fear,”
- **Line 167:** “Camelot:”
- **Line 168:** “space;”
- **Line 169:** “face;”
- **Line 170:** “grace,”
- **Line 171:** “Shalott."”

ENJAMBMENT

"The Lady of Shalott" uses plenty of enjambment to keep its

strange rhythm flowing. Enjambment often provides a sense of momentum and continuity, carrying the reader along as the river's current carries the Lady's boat. In fact, the poem's earliest descriptions of the river are thoroughly enjambed:

> Little breezes dusk and shiver
> Thro' the wave that runs for ever
> By the island in the river
> Flowing down to Camelot.

Enjambment pushes the poem and the reader forward, pulling both through this strange story and creating, at times, an atmosphere of suspense and anticipation.

In one particularly striking moment, enjambment appears just before the refrain, giving that final, end-stopped line a little shock—making it almost a punchline. Take a look at this famous passage:

> Or when the moon was overhead,
> Came two young lovers lately wed:
> "I am half sick of shadows," said
> The Lady of Shalott.

The enjambment here marks an important new element of the poem: the Lady's voice, saying the first words the reader has heard her speak. Coming to the sudden "said," knowing by now that the next line is going to end in "Shalott," the reader feels the enjambed line rushing them into an unusually direct meeting with the Lady they've been hearing about. The momentum of the enjambed line works with the concluding thud of the end-stopped line to let the reader know: this is an important line, an important moment. Perhaps the style here, in drawing attention, also motivates the reader to wonder: what does she mean, "half sick of shadows"?

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "lie / Long"
- **Lines 2-3:** "rye, / That"
- **Lines 4-5:** "by / To"
- **Lines 7-8:** "blow / Round"
- **Lines 11-12:** "shiver / Thro'"
- **Lines 12-13:** " ever / By"
- **Lines 13-14:** "river / Flowing"
- **Lines 15-16:** "towers, / Overlook"
- **Lines 17-18:** "imbowers / The"
- **Lines 20-21:** "trail'd / By"
- **Lines 21-22:** "unhail'd / The "
- **Lines 22-23:** "silken-sail'd / Skimming"
- **Lines 28-29:** "early / In"
- **Lines 29-30:** "barley, / Hear"
- **Lines 30-31:** "cheerly / From"
- **Lines 31-32:** "clearly, / Down"
- **Lines 35-36:** "fairy / Lady"
- **Lines 37-38:** "day / A"
- **Lines 39-40:** "say, / A"
- **Lines 40-41:** "stay / To"
- **Lines 46-47:** "clear / That"
- **Lines 53-54:** "girls, / Pass "
- **Lines 58-59:** "clad, / Goes"
- **Lines 60-61:** "blue / The"
- **Lines 64-65:** "delights / To"
- **Lines 66-67:** "nights / A"
- **Lines 67-68:** " lights / And"
- **Lines 71-72:** "said / The"
- **Lines 76-77:** "greaves / Of"
- **Lines 78-79:** "kneel'd / To"
- **Lines 79-80:** "shield, / That"
- **Lines 80-81:** "field, / Beside"
- **Lines 82-83:** "free, / Like"
- **Lines 83-84:** "see / Hung"
- **Lines 85-86:** "merrily / As"
- **Lines 87-88:** "slung / A"
- **Lines 91-92:** "weather / Thick-jewell'd"
- **Lines 93-94:** "helmet-feather / Burn'd"
- **Lines 98-99:** "light, / Moves"
- **Lines 102-103:** "flow'd / His"
- **Lines 105-106:** "river / He"
- **Lines 107-108:** "river / Sang"
- **Lines 116-117:** "cried / The"
- **Lines 121-122:** "raining / Over"
- **Lines 123-124:** "boat / Beneath"
- **Lines 125-126:** "wrote / / The"
- **Lines 127-128:** "expanse / Like"
- **Lines 130-131:** "countenance / Did"
- **Lines 132-133:** "day / She"
- **Lines 136-137:** "white / That"
- **Lines 139-140:** "night / She"
- **Lines 141-142:** "along / The"
- **Lines 150-151:** "tide / The"
- **Lines 164-165:** "near / Died"

REFRAIN

The use of refrains is one of the most distinctive features of "The Lady of Shalott": one can't read this poem without noticing the steady, circling repetition of "Camelot," "Lancelot," and "Shalott." But where a traditional refrain is often exactly the same over and over, providing a hypnotic feeling of continuity, the refrains here do something a little trickier.

While the reader can be certain that they're going to find at least two of the three refrain words in every stanza, how those words are used changes often. "Shalott," for instance, is usually a reference to the Lady herself, but is sometimes the island. This underscores her inextricable connection to her lonely home. As the poem shows, you can take the Lady off Shalott,

but you can't take the Shalott out of the Lady.

The most meaningful change in the refrain's patterning comes near the end of Part III, in lines 105-108. By now, the reader knows to expect that the last word of the stanza will be "Shalott." But here the pattern breaks:

> From the bank and from the river
> He flash'd into the crystal mirror,
> "Tirra lirra," by the river
> Sang Sir Lancelot.

Suddenly, "Sir Lancelot" appears where "the Lady of Shalott" has always been. This change mirrors (if you will) exactly what's happening in the poem. It's the vision of Sir Lancelot that breaks the Lady, forcing her at last to stand up and look out her window into the real world—and this in turn breaks the mirror. "Lancelot" has displaced "Shalott" in more ways than one.

Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** “ To many-tower'd Camelot;”
- **Line 9:** “ The island of Shalott.”
- **Line 14:** “ Flowing down to Camelot.”
- **Line 18:** “ The Lady of Shalott.”
- **Line 23:** “ Skimming down to Camelot:”
- **Line 27:** “ The Lady of Shalott?”
- **Line 32:** “ Down to tower'd Camelot:”
- **Line 36:** “ Lady of Shalott.””
- **Line 41:** “ To look down to Camelot.”
- **Line 45:** “ The Lady of Shalott.”
- **Line 50:** “ Winding down to Camelot:”
- **Line 54:** “ Pass onward from Shalott.”
- **Line 59:** “ Goes by to tower'd Camelot;”
- **Line 63:** “ The Lady of Shalott.”
- **Line 68:** “ And music, went to Camelot:”
- **Line 72:** “ The Lady of Shalott.”
- **Line 81:** “ Beside remote Shalott.”
- **Line 90:** “ Beside remote Shalott.”
- **Line 95:** “ As he rode down to Camelot.”
- **Line 99:** “ Moves over still Shalott.”
- **Line 104:** “ As he rode down to Camelot.”
- **Line 113:** “ She look'd down to Camelot.”
- **Line 117:** “ The Lady of Shalott.”
- **Line 122:** “ Over tower'd Camelot;”
- **Lines 126-126:** “ / The Lady of Shalott.”
- **Line 131:** “ Did she look to Camelot.”
- **Line 135:** “ The Lady of Shalott.”
- **Line 140:** “ She floated down to Camelot:”
- **Line 144:** “ The Lady of Shalott.”
- **Line 149:** “ Turn'd to tower'd Camelot.”
- **Line 153:** “ The Lady of Shalott.”
- **Line 158:** “ Silent into Camelot.”
- **Lines 162-162:** “ / The Lady of Shalott.”
- **Line 167:** “ All the knights at Camelot:”
- **Line 171:** “ The Lady of Shalott.””

REPETITION

The reader who wants to get technical can find three distinct kinds of repetition in this poem: anaphora (as in "she left the web, she left the loom"), diacope (as in "Round an island there below, / The island of Shalott"), and polyptoton (as in "reapers reaping"). There are also the regular refrains, circling between "Camelot," "Lancelot," and "Shalott."

All of these flavors of repetition serve common purposes. On the level of sound, they contribute to the poem's densely-*woven* patterns, fitting right in with the lavish use of alliteration, assonance, consonance, and sibilance. Repetition, like those devices, reminds the reader that this is a constructed work of art. But there's something else going on here too, and it's related to one of the poem's most important symbols: the mirror.

These different flavors of repetition don't just create a hypnotic circling feeling, like the "river eddy" that "whirls" around Shalott. They also *reflect* and *repeat*. Reflecting and repeating, the alert reader will observe, are the Lady's two major hobbies: looking in the reflecting mirror, repeating what she sees in her weaving. Thus, repeated sounds link to the philosophy of art the poem is working with.

To Tennyson, and to generations of artists before him, art's goal is to create a truthful reflection of the world, in one way or another. Though one isn't all that likely to find literal curses and knights in shining armor in the day-to-day world, Tennyson is still saying something deadly serious about an artist's life—perhaps something that he wouldn't have been able to say as truthfully if he'd used more quotidian images.

The repetition of words and sounds here thus itself mirrors the Lady's work, and Tennyson's work. In the poem's artful repetitions of artful repetitions, the reader finds themself looking into a mirror that shows a mirror. (For more on mirrors as symbols of art, see the "Symbols" section.)

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** “many-tower'd ,” “Camelot”
- **Lines 8-9:** “Round an island there below, / The island of Shalott.”
- **Line 13:** “island”
- **Line 14:** “Camelot”
- **Line 17:** “isle”
- **Lines 18-18:** “ The Lady of / .”
- **Line 18:** “Shalott”
- **Line 23:** “down to ,” “Camelot”
- **Line 25:** “Or”

- **Line 26:** “Or”
- **Line 27:** “ The Lady of Shalott?”
- **Line 28:** “reapers,” “reaping”
- **Line 32:** “ Down to tower'd ,” “Camelot”
- **Line 33:** “reaper”
- **Line 36:** “ Lady of Shalott."”
- **Line 37:** “weaves”
- **Line 40:** “curse”
- **Line 41:** “down to Camelot.”
- **Line 42:** “curse”
- **Line 43:** “weaveth”
- **Line 45:** “ The Lady of Shalott.”
- **Line 50:** “down to ,” “Camelot”
- **Line 52:** “And”
- **Line 53:** “And”
- **Line 54:** “Shalott”
- **Line 55:** “Sometimes a”
- **Line 57:** “Sometimes a”
- **Line 59:** “tower'd Camelot”
- **Line 61:** “knights,” “two and two”
- **Line 62:** “knight”
- **Line 63:** “ The Lady of Shalott.”
- **Line 68:** “went to Camelot:”
- **Line 72:** “ The Lady of Shalott.”
- **Line 81:** “ Beside ,” “remote ,” “Shalott”
- **Line 82:** “bridle”
- **Line 85:** “bridle”
- **Line 86:** “ As he rode ,” “down to Camelot:”
- **Line 89:** “as he rode”
- **Line 90:** “ Beside ,” “remote ,” “Shalott”
- **Line 93:** “The helmet,” “the helmet-feather”
- **Line 95:** “ As he rode ,” “down to Camelot.”
- **Line 99:** “still ,” “Shalott”
- **Line 104:** “ As he rode ,” “down to Camelot.”
- **Line 109:** “She left the,” “she left the”
- **Line 110:** “She”
- **Line 111:** “She saw the”
- **Line 112:** “She saw the”
- **Line 113:** “ She look'd down to Camelot.”
- **Line 117:** “ The Lady of Shalott.”
- **Line 119:** “The”
- **Line 120:** “The”
- **Line 122:** “tower'd Camelot;”
- **Lines 126-126:** “ / The Lady of Shalott.”
- **Line 131:** “Camelot”
- **Line 135:** “ The Lady of Shalott.”
- **Line 140:** “down to Camelot:”
- **Line 143:** “heard,” “singing,” “song”
- **Line 144:** “ The Lady of Shalott.”
- **Line 145:** “Heard”
- **Line 146:** “Chanted,” “chanted”
- **Line 149:** “tower'd Camelot”
- **Line 152:** “Singing,” “song”
- **Line 153:** “ The Lady of Shalott.”
- **Line 158:** “Camelot”
- **Lines 162-162:** “ / The Lady of Shalott.”
- **Line 167:** “Camelot”
- **Line 171:** “ The Lady of Shalott."”

SIBILANCE

"The Lady of Shalott" is rich with hushed sibilance. Sibilance often evokes quiet and mystery, and in this poem it does exactly that, deepening the poem's air of enchantment. "Shalott" itself starts with what is often considered a sibilant sound in the broadest definitions of the term, and the poem's refrain means that the sibilance of the Lady's name follows her all through her story.

Sibilance often appears in onomatopoeic words—that is, words that sound a lot like what they mean. For example look to lines 10-11, where the /s/ and /sh/ sounds evoke the quivering and shivering being described in the land surrounding the Lady's island:

> [...] aspens quiver,
> Little breezes dusk and shiver

The Lady's secrecy, isolation, and mystery (notice how all of those words are themselves sibilant?) are evoked through whispery words as well. Take lines 35-36, where sibilance brings the hushed rumors about the Lady to life:

> Listening, whispers " 'Tis the fairy
> Lady of Shalott."

The same thing happens with lines 39-40, where sibilance adds a tense quiet around the poem's first mentioned of the "curse":

> She has heard a whisper say,
> A curse is on her if she stay

Later, the Lady's angry rejection of the curse is filled with sibilance—the hissing sounds suggesting her bitter, stifled unhappiness:

> "I am half sick of shadows," said
> The Lady of Shalott.

Other moments aren't tied to the Lady herself but still may bring a line's content to life. In lines 22-23, for example, the gentle hush of the sounds suggests the way the little boat lightly skims across the water (note that the /f/ and /th/ sounds are often considered to be a form of sibilance as well and add to this effect):

The shallop flitteth silken-sail'd
Skimming [...]

As a final example, lines 127-130 are again brimming with sibilance:

And down the river's dim expanse
Like some bold seër in a trance,
Seeing all his own mischance—
With a glassy countenance

Here, the sibilance has a hypnotic effect on the poem and foreshadows the doom that awaits the Lady now that she's broken the curse and taken to the river.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "aspens"
- **Line 11:** "dusk," "shiver"
- **Line 22:** "shallop flitteth silken-sail'd"
- **Line 23:** "Skimming"
- **Line 25:** "casement seen," "stand"
- **Line 35:** "Listening, whispers"
- **Line 36:** "Shalott"
- **Line 39:** "She," "whisper say"
- **Line 40:** "curse," "she stay"
- **Line 71:** "sick," "shadows," "said"
- **Line 72:** "Shalott"
- **Line 118:** "stormy east," "straining"
- **Line 127:** "expanse"
- **Line 128:** "some," "seër," "trance"
- **Line 129:** "Seeing," "mischance"
- **Line 130:** "glassy," "countenance"
- **Line 143:** "singing," "last song"
- **Line 152:** "Singing," "song she"
- **Line 153:** "Shalott"

VOCABULARY

Barley and rye (Line 2) - Grain crops.

Clothe the wold (Line 3) - To clothe is to put clothes on something. "Wold" is an old term for open land. The wold is metaphorically clothed in barley and rye.

Thro' (Line 4, Line 12, Line 46, Line 60, Line 66, Line 75, Line 96, Line 110, Line 139) - Through (pronounced just the same!).

Camelot (Line 5, Line 14, Line 23, Line 32, Line 41, Line 50, Line 59, Line 68, Line 86, Line 95, Line 104, Line 113, Line 122, Line 131, Line 140, Line 149, Line 158, Line 167) - The legendary castle of King Arthur and his knights.

Willows and aspens (Line 10, Line 19, Line 124, Line 142) - Types of trees.

Quiver (Line 10) - To shake or tremble.

Imbowers (Line 17) - Shelters with trees or leafy plants

Barges (Line 20) - Long, flat-bottomed boats—used either for carrying goods or as pleasure-boats.

Unhail'd (Line 21) - Ungreeted (and in this context, unnoticed).

Shallop (Line 22) - A small sailboat.

Flitteth (Line 22) - Flits—that is, moved quickly and lightly.

Hath (Line 24, Line 44, Line 62) - Has.

Casement (Line 25) - Window.

Reapers (Line 28) - People harvesting grain.

Cheerly (Line 30) - Brightly and pleasantly.

Sheaves (Line 34) - Bundles of harvested grain stalks.

Uplands (Line 34) - High, hilly lands.

Web and loom (Line 38, Line 64, Line 109, Line 114) - The "web" is the woven tapestry; the "loom" is the wooden frame upon which tapestries are made.

Gay (Line 38) - Bright, lively, and beautiful.

Eddy (Line 51) - A little circular current in water, like a miniature whirlpool.

Churls (Line 52) - Peasants.

Abbot on an ambling pad (Line 56) - The religious leader of an abbey, riding a slow-moving horse.

Page (Line 58) - A young man in training to be a knight.

Bow-shot (Line 73) - The distance an arrow flies.

Bower-eaves (Line 73) - The overhanging part of the roof above the Lady's window.

Brazen greaves (Line 76) - Bronze shinguards (part of a suit of armor).

Sir Lancelot (Line 77) - The greatest of the Knights of the Round Table. King Arthur's closest friend, he is also his betrayer: he famously has a passionate affair with Arthur's wife Guinevere.

Gemmy bridle (Line 82) - The part of a horse's tack that fits around its face and neck. Sir Lancelot's is "gemmy," covered in precious jewels.

Blazon'd baldric (Line 87) - A baldric is a belt worn across the chest from which a knight in armor might hang weapons or other equipment. Lancelot's is "blazon'd," marked with his heraldic insignia.

Bugle (Line 88) - A hunting horn (something like a trumpet).

Bearded meteor (Line 98) - A meteor—a shooting star—might be "bearded" with the streak of light it leaves behind it in the sky.

Burnish'd (Line 101) - Polished like shining metal.

Tirra lirra (Line 107) - Nonsense to sing when you're singing a

tune without words, like "la la la" or "doot doo doo."

Waning (Line 119) - Diminishing or fading.

Prow (Line 125) - The pointed front end of a boat.

Seër (Line 128) - A prophet; someone who sees visions. (The dots over the second "e" are called an umlaut, and they mean that the word is here pronounced "see-er.").

Mischance (Line 129) - Bad fortune.

Countenance (Line 130) - Facial expression.

Carol (Line 145) - A holy song, like a hymn.

Ere (Line 150) - Before.

Wharfs (Line 159) - Docks—places to tie up a boat.

Burgher (Line 160) - Citizen (with a connotation of being well-to-do or middle class).

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem has 171 lines broken into 19 stanzas of 9 lines apiece. The poem is also broken up into four sections—labeled Part I, II, III, and IV.

- Part I establishes the poem's setting, describing the world surrounding the island of Shalott and introducing the mysterious Lady whom no one seems to actually know.
- Part II then zooms in on the Lady herself, revealing that she spends all her time weaving beautiful, colorful scenes on her loom. Here readers also learn that she is under some sort of curse, and sees the world only via its reflection in a mirror.
- Part III introduces Sir Lancelot as he goes past the Lady's tower, looking so striking that she leaves the loom to look at him—triggering the curse in the process.
- Part IV then reveals the consequences of that curse, as the Lady dies while floating down the river to Camelot.

The sections get longer as the poem goes on and the poem increases in detail and complexity.

With this structure, Tennyson invented his own form that doesn't resemble too many other poems. (Take a look at the "Meter" and "Rhyme Scheme" sections for more on the poem's shape.) But while the poem blazes its own formal path, it does have a certain affinity with the ballad tradition.

Ballads were a popular form of poetic storytelling; lots of folk songs use ballad meter to tell stories of drama, adventure, and magic. The earlier Romantic poets, especially Wordsworth and Coleridge, often wrote in this form, and their work had a big influence on Tennyson. Though he's using a more complex and innovative shape than the ancient simplicity of ballad meter, he's fitting right in with the ballad tradition of telling a legendary story in verse. Breaking the story up into parts add to that legendary feeling, as though the speaker is relaying chapters from a book or acts from a play.

METER

A reader versed in legends and myths might expect "The Lady of Shalott" to take on a pretty regular meter—for instance, a ballad meter, often used for stories of magic. But while this poem does have a strong rhythm, that rhythm isn't fully predictable.

Most of the stanzas use tetrameter, meaning there are four feet per line, and break into trimeter (three feet per line) for the last lines of each stanza. These lines are generally a mix of iambic (da-DUM) and trochaic (DUM-da) in their rhythms.

Here is an example of perfect iambic tetrameter from line 26:

> Or is | she known | in all | the land,

And now a line of trochaic tetrameter from line 10:

> Willows | whiten, | aspens | quiver,

The stanzas contain a mixture of these meters, but it's not always predictable which lines will take which meter. Take a look at the very first stanza, where lines 1-6 are pretty standard iambic tetrameter:

> On ei- | ther side | the riv- | er lie
> Long fields | of bar- | ley and | of rye,
> That clothe | the wold | and meet | the sky;
> And thro' | the field | the road | runs by
> To man | y-tow- | er'd Cam | elot;
> And up | and down | the peo- | ple go,

It's possible to scan a few of these feet a little differently, but overall the rhythm is steady. Lines 7-9 then changes things up, though; lines 7-8 are written in *trochaic* tetrameter (albeit with the final unstressed syllable cut off), and the final line is, as noted above, iambic *trimeter*, because it has just three feet instead of four:

> Gazing | where the | lilies | blow
> Round an | island | there be- | low,
> The is- | land of | Shalott.

This imbues the poem with a steady musicality but also keeps readers on their toes. This irregularity might have made the lines sound more like a rhythm from everyday speech, if it weren't for the insistently poetic AAAABCCCB rhyme scheme

(take a look at the "Rhyme Scheme" section for more on this). The regular repetition of the words "Camelot" or "Lancelot" in the middle of each stanza, and the even more regular repetition of "Shalott" in the last line of each stanza, make the poem's artistry even clearer.

In short, there's a metrical structure here that matches the poem's themes: the more wandering, naturalistic rhythm of stressed and unstressed beats contrasts with the artificially (in the sense of "made by an artist," not "fake") strict rhyme pattern, just as the earthy beauty and bustle of the world around Shalott contrasts with the Lady's world of images and art.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme of "The Lady of Shalott" is one of the poem's most distinctive features. It's a steady and attention-grabbing pattern throughout, running, in each stanza, as:

AAAABCCCB

Tennyson made up this pattern for this poem: it's not found in any poetic tradition before him. For that reason, it's worth taking an especially close look at how it works here.

There's a feeling of imbalance baked right into this scheme, a contrast of regularity and unease that comes from the more heavily-loaded top end of the stanza. The four A rhymes at the beginning of each stanza sit alongside evocative descriptions, setting the scene for the middle line, which always takes the reader back either to the thought of "Camelot" or to the gorgeous "Lancelot." The second part of each stanza hurries on faster, with only three C rhymes before the almost-inevitable concluding rhyme on "Shalott."

The repeated rhymes on "Shalott," "Camelot," and "Lancelot," among the insistently repeating A and C rhymes, set up a lovely but ominous rhythm, like the beat of a funeral drum: the predictable and emphatic rhymes give the reader a sense of fate or inevitability.

These rhymes also draw attention to themselves, never letting readers forget that they're reading a work of art. And the contrast of these powerful rhymes with the poem's unpredictable metrical pattern fits right in with the poem's concerns about fitting art and life together. (Take a look at the "Meter" section for more on how meter and rhyme interact in this poem.)

There's only one place in the poem where the last word of a stanza isn't "Shalott," and it's at the end of the long, loving description of Sir Lancelot's beauty:

> 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.

This unexpected alteration in the pattern of words (though not the rhyme scheme) jolts the reader and the Lady at the same time. "Sir Lancelot" has literally *displaced* "Shalott" in the Lady's attention—pushing both her home and her own identity out of her thoughts.

Within the poem's strict rhyme scheme, the linkage of sounds between "Shalott," "Lancelot," and "Camelot" suggests that these things are bound up together—but they can only coexist at a distance. When one pushes the other out of its expected place, disaster follows.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Lady of Shalott" is a storyteller, with a sensitive, lyrical voice. The speaker is a hovering, omniscient watcher, able to look in on the Lady, on Sir Lancelot, on the reapers. But the speaker sticks closest to the Lady's side, and often seems to look through her eyes.

For instance, the long and lovingly-detailed account of Sir Lancelot's arrival—a vision of the knight that glows with inner and outer light—feels very close to the Lady's overpowering experience. Certainly the speaker's sympathy stays with the Lady throughout; the reader might guess that this storyteller, who seems himself to be a weaver of words, might feel like he has a few things in common with the poem's heroine.

SETTING

The poem basically has two settings: within and outside the Lady's tower on the island of Shalott. The Lady's tower is a lonely place, containing only herself and her loom.

Beyond the tower, the Arthurian countryside of the poem is richly autumnal. Out in the fields around Shalott, reapers are bringing in the harvest, the fields and trees are golden, and the sky is a glorious blue. But it doesn't seem to be autumn on Shalott itself, where lilies—summer flowers—are blooming. Shalott is cut off from the world of harvesting and enjoying: on the island, there are flowers aplenty, but no fruit. There's also a sharp division between the lively, busy town and the countryside around Shalott, where people pass by and work, but only the Lady stays.

Camelot, when the lady's body finally makes it there, is then prosperous and elegant, full of partying nobles and wealthy citizens. But (with the important exception of Lancelot) the people who live in this physical, social world don't know what to think of the Lady's body. She's thus cut off, not only from the

fertility of the countryside, but the sociability of the town.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) is among the greatest of the Victorian poets: an 800-pound gorilla of the mid-19th-century English literary scene. Relatively unusually among those poets whose reputation endures, he was respected and wealthy *during* his lifetime, and served as Poet Laureate of England under Queen Victoria.

Tennyson began his poetic career as a student at Cambridge. There he met two friends, Arthur Hallam and William Henry Brookfield, who would become some of his greatest influences both artistically and personally. Hallam's tragic death, just before he was to marry Tennyson's sister, inspired Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, a powerful elegy that would prove prophetic of the general Victorian obsession with mourning which would reach its height after the death of Prince Albert.

Like his contemporaries and friends Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Tennyson was influenced by the Romantic poets, whose interest in folklore, magic, and deeply-felt emotion is clearly reflected in his work. The death of the dashing Lord Byron came as a meaningful shock to him as a young boy (though he admired Byron less as he got older). But he also considered himself part of a longer English poetic lineage that reached back to Milton and Shakespeare. One can also see Dante's influence on Tennyson in his famous "Ulysses," which retells an episode from Dante's *Inferno*.

"The Lady of Shalott" in particular fits into a broader Victorian interest in old English legends and in magic—perhaps a wistful interest, arising in reaction to the dirt and steel of the Industrial Revolution. The painters of the contemporary Pre-Raphaelite movement, who shared Tennyson's romantic nostalgia, loved to portray scenes from his work. (Take a look at the "Resources" section for just one famous example.)

Tennyson was more widely influential, too; marks of his thought and style appear in the writings of many of his contemporaries, and in works written long after his death. There's even a reference to "The Lady of Shalott" in Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*.

Tennyson substantially revised "The Lady of Shalott" between 1833, when he first drafted it, and 1842, when he completed the version we're using for this guide. His changes often reflect a more nuanced, ambiguous understanding of the artist's life. For instance, where in the early draft the Lady is more explicitly a captive in her tower, the later revision suggests that the Lady stays at her loom by choice as well as by curse. There's a link to a side-by-side comparison of the 1833 and 1842 versions in the "Resources" section.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As a major public figure during the reign of Queen Victoria, Tennyson was significant not only to a nation but to an empire. During his lifetime, proverbially, the "sun never set on the British Empire": Britain had colonial holdings across the world, and was *the* major world power. At the same time, the new wealth (and new difficulties) of the Industrial Revolution were changing the face of Britain, as what was once a primarily rural nation quickly became primarily urban. Staggering poverty and staggering luxury coexisted in the newly crowded cities.

Victorian English social mores, especially among the upper classes, were marked by a strong sense of propriety, tradition, and conformity. The Victorians considered themselves models for the world, and their strict social, moral, and sexual codes were so marked that today people sometimes use the word "Victorian" to mean "prudish."

But there was plenty of revolutionary fervor going on beneath Victorian Britain's staid face. Social reformers like Dickens were critiquing the excesses, cruelties, and filth of the Industrial Revolution; early feminists were beginning to demand property and voting rights for women. And while Queen Victoria herself was deeply traditional in her beliefs, she was also a novelty: the first Queen of England since Elizabeth I to wield true power.

Tennyson, like his Queen, was an innovator, but no revolutionary. His poetry reflects a wistfulness for codes of legendary chivalry and natural beauty—and his bombastic verse commemorating heroic British soldiers shows him as a dyed-in-the-wool Victorian, a committed subject of a powerful Queen.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A cartoon response — The modern-day cartoonist Kate Beaton with a feminist take on the poem. (http://www.harkavagrant.com/index.php?id=360)
- Tennyson's Voice — Tennyson speaks! This is an early wax-cylinder recording of Tennyson reading another of his most famous poems, "The Charge of the Light Brigade." (This particular video also creepily animates a photo of his face.) (https://youtu.be/MkqUq26z1CE)
- Side-by-Side Comparison of the Versions of "Shalott" — Tennyson wrote his first draft of "The Lady of Shalott" in 1833, and revised it substantially; the version we're using here is from 1842. In comparing the two versions, what do you notice? Why might Tennyson have made the changes he did? (https://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/text/tennyson-shalott-comparison)
- A Short Biography of Tennyson — The Poetry Foundation's

Tennyson page, with a short biography and links to more of his poems. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/alfred-tennyson)

- Art Inspired by the Poem — John William Waterhouse's famous interpretation of "The Lady of Shalott." Tennyson's poem was a popular subject for Pre-Raphaelite artists like Waterhouse; search for "Lady of Shalott" and "Pre-Raphaelite" to find many more Victorian painters' takes on the poem. (https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/waterhouse-the-lady-of-shalott-n01543)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ALFRED LORD TENNYSON POEMS

- Break, Break, Break
- Crossing the Bar
- Tears, Idle Tears
- The Brook
- The Charge of the Light Brigade
- The Kraken
- Ulysses

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Nelson, Kristin. "*The Lady of Shalott.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 8 Jul 2020. Web. 25 Aug 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Nelson, Kristin. "*The Lady of Shalott.*" LitCharts LLC, July 8, 2020. Retrieved August 25, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/alfred-lord-tennyson/the-lady-of-shalott.