

The Lady of Shalott



by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

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The Lady of Shalott: Introduction

"The Lady of Shalott" tells the story of a woman who lives in a tower in Shalott, which is an island on a river that runs, along with the road beside it, to Camelot, the setting of the legends about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Every day, the woman weaves a tapestry picture of the landscape that is visible from her window, including Camelot. There is, however, a curse on her; the woman does not know the cause of the curse, but she knows that she cannot look directly out of the window, so she views the subjects of her artwork through a mirror that is beside her. The woman is happy to weave, but is tired of looking at life only as a reflection. One day, Sir Lancelot rides by, looking bold and handsome in his shining armor, and singing. The woman goes to the window to look directly out of it, and the moment she does, she knows that the curse is upon her. So she leaves the tower, finds a boat at the side of the river, writes "The Lady of Shalott" on the side of the boat, and floats off down the river toward Camelot. As she drifts along, singing and observing all of the sights that were forbidden to her before, she dies. The boat floats past Camelot, and all of the knights make the sign of the cross upon seeing a corpse go by, but Lancelot, seeing her for the first time, notes, "She

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. 45

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: 50
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, 55
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 60
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, 65
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; 70
"I am half sick of shadows," said
The Lady of Shalott.

III

A bow-shot from her bower-eaves,
He rode between the barley-sheaves,
The sun came dazzling through the leaves, 75
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, 80
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 85
As he rode down to Camelot:
And from his blazoned baldric slung
A mighty silver bugle hung,
And as he rode his armour rung,
Beside remote Shalott. 90

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. 95

As often through the purple night,
Below the starry clusters bright,
Some bearded meteor, trailing light,
 Moves over still Shalott.

His broad clear brow in sunlight glow'd; 100
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 105
He flashed into the crystal mirror,
"Sir Lancelot," by the river
 Sang Sir Lancelot.

She left the web, she left the loom,
She made three paces thro' the room, 110
She saw the water-lily bloom,
She saw the helmet and the plume,
 She looked down to Camelot.
Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror cracked from side to side; 115
"The curse is come upon me," cried
 The Lady of Shalott.

IV

In the stormy east-wind straining,
The pale yellow woods were waning,
The broad stream in his banks complaining, 120
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 125
 The Lady of Shalott.

And down the river's dim expanse
Like some bold seer in a trance,
Seeing all his own mischance—
With a glassy countenance 130
 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. 135

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: 140
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 145
Chanted loudly, chanted lowly,
Till her blood was frozen slowly,
And her eyes were darkened wholly,
 Turned to tower'd Camelot.
For ere she reach'd upon the tide 150

Tennyson enrolled at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1827. There he met Arthur Hallam, a brilliant undergraduate who became Tennyson's closest friend and ardent admirer of his poetry. Hallam's enthusiasm was welcomed by Tennyson, whose personal circumstances had led to a growing despondency: his father died in 1831, leaving Tennyson's family in debt and forcing his early departure from school; one of Tennyson's brothers suffered a mental breakdown and required institutionalization; and Tennyson himself was morbidly fearful of falling victim to epilepsy or madness. Hallam's untimely death in 1833, which prompted the series of elegies later comprising [In Memoriam](#), contributed greatly to Tennyson's despair. In describing this period, he wrote: "I suffered what seemed to me to shatter all my life so that I desired to die rather than to live." For nearly a decade after Hallam's death, Tennyson published no poetry. During this time, he became engaged to Emily Sellwood, but financial difficulties and Tennyson's persistent anxiety over the condition of his health resulted in their separation. In 1842, an unsuccessful financial venture cost Tennyson nearly everything he owned, causing him to succumb to a deep depression that required medical treatment. Tennyson later resumed his courtship of Sellwood, and they were married in 1850. The timely success of *In Memoriam*, published that same year, ensured Tennyson's appointment as Poet Laureate, succeeding William Wordsworth. In 1883, Tennyson accepted a peerage, the first poet to be so honored strictly on the basis of literary achievement. Tennyson died October 6, 1892, and was interred in Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey.

The Lady of Shalott: Summary

Lines 1-9

This poem starts off by giving a visual overview of the situation. The reader is shown the river and the road, and, far in the distance, the towers of Camelot. The people mentioned in this section are not given specific identities; rather, they are common people going about their daily business. It is from their perspective that the poem first shows Shalott, an island in the river.

Lines 10-18

The imagery here is of nature, of freedom, of movement. This is contrasted with the inflexible, colorless walls and towers of Camelot in line 15. The flowers in the next line are not described by their colors or even by their motion in the breeze, but are "overlooked" by the grey walls, as if they are held prisoner. This tone of severity in the middle of nature's healthy activity prepares the reader for the introduction of the Lady of Shalott in line 18.

Lines 19-27

Lines 19-23 focus again on the human activity going on around the island: small river barges pass with heavy loads; small, quick boats called "shallops" skim past the shore around the tower, referred to here as a "margin." With all of this activity, the poem asks who has seen the woman who lives in the tower, implying that she is mysterious, unknown, "veiled."

Lines 28-36

In the fourth stanza of Section I, the imagery changes from relying on the senses of sight and touch (as implied by the plants' motions in the wind in stanza 2) to the sense of sound. The poem tells us that the lady who lives in the tower has not been seen, and is known only to the farmers who hear her singing while they work in their fields so early in the morning that the moon is still out. Because they never see her but only hear her singing, the reapers think of the Lady of Shalott as a spirit, a "fairy." Up to this point, the reader has not been introduced to her, either, and knows only as much about her as those outside of the tower know.

Lines 37-45

The Lady seems to be happy where she is: her songs echo "cheerly" (line 30) and she weaves her picture in happy, gay colors (line 38) and she has no care in the world other than weaving (line 44). In this stanza, though, the reader finds out that the Lady will have a curse visited on her if she looks at Camelot. This idea

combines many familiar themes: readers generally recognize the maiden trapped in the tower from the tale of Rapunzel or the maiden placed under a spell from the story of Sleeping Beauty; in addition, according to Greek myth, Penelope, the wife of Ulysses, avoided men who wanted to court her while her husband was away by constantly weaving, but then unravelling her work at night so that she would never be done. This is an appropriate allusion because both Penelope and the Lady of Shalott use their craft as a substitute for human involvement. Strangely, the Lady does not know why she has to avoid direct interaction, nor does she seem to care.

Lines 46-54

Not able to look directly at the world out of her window, the Lady observes it through a mirror. This stanza describes a few of the things she sees in that mirror. The images she sees are described as "shadows." According to the Greek philosopher [Plato](#) we experience life like a person would who was chained up inside of the mouth of a cave: he cannot see out, he can only see the shadows of people passing the cave flickering on the wall, and he thinks that the shadows are reality. In that same way we all, according to Plato, mistake images of reality for actual reality, which we cannot see. For the Lady of Shalott, reality is not the broad landscape but the images (Tennyson calls them "shadows") she sees in the mirror.

Lines 55-63

The people in this stanza are in motion, going about their busy lives while hers is solitary and static. Reflected in her mirror she sees a group of happy girls, a clergyman, a page, and, sometimes, the knights of Camelot, riding in columns.

Lines 64-72

The action of the poem begins in this stanza, where the Lady's attitude changes: in line 55, she is delighted with the picture she is weaving of the outside world, but in line 71, the first time she speaks, she says she is unhappy with her situation. In between the two, she observes people participating in events—a funeral is mentioned first, then a wedding—that make her aware of how lonely it is to be unable to participate.

Lines 73-81

The image of Sir Lancelot shoots into the Lady's mirror with the force of an arrow fired from the roof just outside of her bedroom window. The description that Tennyson gives of the knight mixes his bold, powerful look with his chivalrous actions. Sunlight glints on his shiny armor, making him look as if he is on fire, and the speaker of the poem also tells us that he is the type of knight who always, even if dressed for battle, took time to kneel when he encountered a lady. His knighthood confirms that he is a man of the highest honor and nobility.

Lines 82-90

This second stanza of Section III shifts the description of Lancelot from the visual to the audible. The bells of his bridle ring "merrily" as he rides, his armor rings as well, and in his equipment belt, the "baldric," is a "mighty bugle"; the musical notes of which communicate the situation at hand.

Lines 91-99

This stanza, in which Sir Lancelot is likened to a meteor, glowing as if he were on fire, splendid in his armor and "trailing light," serves to emphasize what an impressive sight he was as he rode toward Camelot.

Lines 100-108

After the intricate description that the reader has been given of Lancelot, it is in this stanza, in line 106, that the Lady is able to see him for the first time. Tennyson says that he "flashed into the crystal mirror," which is fitting because his shining armor seems to flash everywhere he goes, but it is especially appropriate because the Lady earlier referred to the images in her mirror as "shadows" (line 71), which are of course dark and dull.

Also of significance is that Sir Lancelot sings. The immediate cause of the Lady's attraction to him, the thing that prompts her to look out of the window, is not visual, but audible; here Tennyson suggests the fullness of life that the Lady cannot avoid any longer. Lancelot sings a traditional folk refrain, which would be historically accurate and would invoke a sense of nostalgia in readers of Tennyson's time.

Lines 109-117

Although it is Sir Lancelot's singing that makes the Lady tempt fate by going to the window and looking out, she never actually sees him, just his helmet and the feather upon it. The irony of this is buried, however, within the rush of mystical occurrences which indicate that the curse the Lady mentioned in line 40 is indeed real: the mirror cracks, the tapestry unravels. This could also be given a psychological interpretation, with the events that are presented as "actually" happening being explained as symbols of what is going on in the Lady's head: in this interpretation, the moment the woman becomes involved in the outside world her sense of self (the mirror) and of her accomplishments (the tapestry) comes apart, as if social interaction is a curse to the ego.

Lines 118-126

The season has changed—earlier in the poem, when the barley was being harvested (lines 28-29), the setting was late summer; line 119 describes an autumn scene (the falling leaves of line 138 support this). Although the time described does not seem to allow for a change of seasons, the magical element (most obvious in the unexplained source of the Lady's curse) creates an atmosphere where this compression of time is not unreasonable. It is significant that the Lady takes the time to write her name on the side of the boat: if one accepts the interpretation that the mirror symbolizes self-knowledge, then she is a woman whose identity has been "shattered" at this point of the poem. She has no name to sign, just a title ("Lady") and a location ("Shalott").

Lines 127-135

"Mischance" means misfortune or bad luck—the Lady understands that she is doomed as she looks toward Camelot, which had been so attractive to her that it (in the person of Sir Lancelot) forced her to look, sealing her fate. Earlier, she looked at Camelot through a mirror, seeing it where her own reflection would normally be; in line 130 the look on her face ("countenance") is described as glassy, which suggests the mirror, but does not reflect.

Lines 136-144

"They" mentioned in line 143 are the reapers who earlier in the poem were so charmed by the Lady's voice.

Lines 145-153

The death of the Lady of Shalott is surrounded with standard death images: cold, darkness, and mournful singing, among others. This is a transitional stanza, connecting the dying woman's departure with the dead woman's arrival at Camelot.

Lines 154-162

The Lady's corpse is described as "dead-pale" and "gleaming," providing a stark visual contrast to the night as she floats past Camelot. Tennyson lists the occupants of the castle in line 160, as they are probably becoming aware of the Lady's existence for the first time, although she was very aware of theirs. They are described as curious, going out of their houses and onto the wharf to look, walking around to read the front of the boat. This stanza ends leaving the reader to anticipate what effect the sight will have on the people of Camelot.

Lines 163-171

In the first five lines of this stanza, the initial curiosity of the people of Camelot turns to fear, the primitive fear of seeing a dead person, and the way these Christian people respond in order to protect themselves when frightened is to make the sign of the cross. Tennyson brings this entire long poem to a climax at this point: the

Lady of Shalott was so enchanted with the idea of Camelot that she eventually was forced to look out of the window to see it herself, and in these lines she produces an emotional effect that is almost equally as strong. But Lancelot, whose stunning presence affected the Lady so personally that it ultimately drew her to her death, looks at her, thinks for "a little space," and finally, dispassionately, remarks that she is pretty. Tennyson makes Lancelot's next line a standard benediction of the time that might have been said over anyone, whether friend or stranger.

The Lady of Shalott: Themes

Deprivation

In this poem, the main character exists under a spell without knowing what its origin is or why it has been put on her and without thinking of how she can remove it. She seems to accept it as her fate: "And so she weaveth steadily, / And little other care has she" (lines 43-44), the poem explains. The one stipulation of this mysterious curse is that she cannot look out her window at the panorama of nature and humanity that is so clearly outlined in the poem's first section. She does not seem to care that she is deprived of direct contact with the world. She does not question why she has been cursed like this. Tennyson does not provide an explanation for the curse; he does not offer a reason why this woman is denied the immediate pleasures and problems of real life. Perhaps the poet wanted the psychology behind her captivity to be open-ended and to invite readers to apply various interpretations to her situation and behavior. The important point is that she is isolated, forced to observe the world indirectly through a mirror, and she does not seem to object to this deprivation until her interest in handsome Lancelot overcomes her initial detachment.

Art and Artifice

The Lady of Shalott's view of reality depends on the reflection she perceives in her mirror. Mirrors may be thought of as devices that accurately duplicate the scene they reflect, but images in mirrors are different than reality. They reverse the subject and relegate it to two dimensions. Moreover, the objects reflected in this mirror cannot hurt the Lady of Shalott the same way objects viewed directly can. The reflected scenes of the Camelot countryside are further altered by her artistic imagination, as she incorporates them into her tapestry: it is her delight "[t]o weave the mirror's magic sights" (line 65). The Lady is thus presented as an artist, more involved in her creative version of her indirect experience than with life experience itself. Indeed, she represents the nineteenth-century emphasis on the problems and issues connected to the artist's subjectivity. Reality as she knows it is flat but gives the sense of depth; she transforms that reality imaginatively with her bright threads, yet she also renders it two-dimensional. When she faces actual reality by looking out the window, it breaks the mirror that she no longer needs to see through and also destroys her handiwork. Reality makes the art she has created vanish.

Infatuation

Quite a few critics suggest that the Lady of Shalott dies of a broken heart because she is suddenly infatuated with the dazzlingly beautiful Lancelot and he does not return her affection. This reading applies to the traditional tale that is the source for the piece; in the story of Elaine of Astolat, Elaine does indeed suffer from rejection. The Lady of Shalott, however, is a variation on that character, different in several ways. Tennyson changed the setting from Astolat to Shalott, an ancient variation of the name. In his poem, the Lady and Lancelot never meet: when he does see her for the first time, dead in her boat, he expresses belated interest.

Readers are told of Lancelot's physical appeal well before the Lady knows anything about it. He is described as having a broad, clear brow; his shield bares a picture of a knight kneeling to a lady, and his saddle is decked with jewels. But what draws the Lady to look out the window is the sound of his beautiful singing. As soon as she sees him, her weaving literally flies out the window, and her mirror cracks. "The curse is come upon me" (line 116), she says.

This reaction can be seen as symbolic. Being distracted by Lancelot brings the curse upon her. The curse may be understood as the loss of her creative perception of the world. Stated differently, she loses her way of keeping her mind occupied with work. In turn, the mirror's cracking suggests the idea that she can no longer focus only on artwork once her interest in another person draws her into the world at large. She is not "rejected" by Lancelot because, in this version, he is unaware of her until the end; still, she finds herself so drawn to him that she takes her life into her own hands, just to see the face that goes with that voice.

Liberation

After she realizes that the curse has come upon her, the Lady of Shalott does not die immediately. Her exposure to the real world, even though it means her death, also means that she can express herself directly in the world. She leaves the tower, finds a boat, and writes her title on it before lying in it and casting off. Her trip down the river is her passive entry into the world of action. Or it could be understood as her acquiescence to her feelings. Curiously, even though it is Lancelot who distracts her from her weaving and thus seals her fate, her final action does not focus on him. She lets the river take her where it will, past all of the people and places she only has intuited partially in the mirror, and she sings, expressing herself in this moment to the world around her.

The Lady of Shalott: Style

"The Lady of Shalott" is a ballad. There is no standard structure for a ballad, but the term refers to a poem or a song that tells the story of a person or people, usually with details that give them qualities that are larger than life.

The poem is divided into four numbered sections, with each section, like a story, rising to a climax before it ends. This structure helps capture the reader's interest, enticing the reader to find out what will happen next. Each section is broken down, not quite equally, into stanzas, which are sections in poetry similar to paragraphs in prose. There are four stanzas in Parts I and II, five stanzas in Part III, and six in Part IV. Keeping the early sections shorter allows the poet to hold the reader's attention.

The stanzas all contain the same basic structure: there are nine lines, with a rhyme scheme of *aaaabcccb*. This means that in each stanza the final sounds of the first four lines (coded as the *a* sound) are similar; lines 5 and 9 rhyme (the *b* sound); and lines 6, 7, and 8 rhyme with each other. Unlike some poets, who try to de-emphasize or conceal rhymes, Tennyson brings attention to rhymes by making most of the lines end-stopped—the flow of words is brought to a halt by punctuation. This strong emphasis on rhymes helps to give the poem the feeling of an ancient tale, since it resembles poems from the time before printing was developed, when news was carried from town to town by word of mouth and rhyming aided memorization.

The lines of this poem are written in iambic tetrameter. An "iamb" is a unit of poetry (referred to as a "poetic foot") that has an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable—in the first line, for example, the syllables "eith" "side" "riv" and "lie" are accented more heavily than the syllables that come before them. Iambic poetry closely follows the up-and-down pattern of English speech, making the poem's structure hardly noticeable. Tetrameter means that there are four feet to each line ("tetra" is the Greek word for "four"), for a total of eight syllables to each line.

The Lady of Shalott: Historical Context

Arthurian Legend

The character Tennyson calls the Lady of Shalott is based on Elaine of Astolat, one of the figures from the legend of King Arthur. Traditionally, she was identified only as "demoiselle d'escalot," the fair maid of Astolat. It was Sir Thomas Malory who gave her the name "Elaine" in his 1485 book [Le Morte d'Arthur](#).

Tennyson wrote about her as Elaine, the Lilly Maid of Astolat, in *The Idylls of the King*, published in 1885, but in his poem "The Lady of Shalott," he has taken liberties, leaving her without a name and changing "Astolat" to the archaic "Shalott." In both versions, the character dies of unrequited love for Sir Lancelot and floats down the river in a barge, to be wondered about by the common people who are going about their daily concerns.

The legends of King Arthur and his knights are mythical, although many researchers have put forth theories about the actual historical existence of the people they describe. The legends began appearing during the [Middle Ages](#) between the fifth and fifteenth centuries. The earliest record of a King Arthur is in a seventh-century Welsh text. Arthurian stories were told all over Europe, particularly in France. The first continuous narrative of the legend, with most of the knights and supporting characters and specific episodes that readers know in the twenty-first century, appeared in the *Historia Regum Britainne* ("History of the Kings of Britain") by the English writer Geoffrey of Monmouth, published in or around 1139. It was this book that identified the Arthur of Camelot as the sixth-century king, son of Uther Pendragon, who kept council with his court of knights at a round table and was married to Guinevere. Other historians have guessed that there were other kings named Arthur who could have inspired the legends.

Lancelot, the bold knight who is mentioned in this poem, is not mentioned in the earlier legends. He first appears in the late twelfth century, in *Le Chevalier de Charette* by Chrétien de Troyes and *Lanzelot* by Ulrich von Zatzikhofen. This character quickly became an integral part of the myth, a favorite character because he embodies the qualities of courage and chivalry that befit the tales.

According to legend, Lancelot is born "Galahad" but has his name changed early in life when his family is killed by a fire (he later has a son named Galahad with Elaine of Corbenic, who is different than Elaine of Astolat). He is raised by "The Lady of the Lake," a mystical character who is said to have given Arthur the sword, Excalibur, which establishes him as king. It is her influence that establishes Lancelot on his eighteenth birthday as a knight of the Round Table. There, he proves to be the most valiant knight, but he also becomes treacherous: he and Arthur's wife, Guinevere, fall in love and have an affair.

It is their sexual relationship that destroys the court at Camelot. When Arthur finds out about it, he orders Guinevere to be executed for treason. Lancelot and his army attack, spiriting the queen away and killing many knights. Guinevere is returned to Arthur, and Lancelot goes to France where he establishes a rival court. In later years, the animosity between the two men cools, and Lancelot returns to Camelot before Arthur's death to ask his forgiveness. He then retires to live a secluded, monkish life at his castle.

Romanticism

In terms of literary movements, Tennyson is most closely associated with the Victorian era. Queen Victoria liked his work and appointed him Poet Laureate of Britain, a post he held from 1850 to 1892. The first version of this poem appeared in 1833, though, when Tennyson was in his twenties. Its sensibilities reveal a closer attachment to the Romantic movement, which was at its peak at that time.

No category can capture the sensibilities of all of the artists who worked in a particular time, but it is sometimes helpful to name philosophical movements and to group thinkers with similar ideas in order to get a sense of the prevailing mood of an era. [Romanticism](#) was the prevailing mood at the end of the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth. It is a reaction against the previous mood, which is called the Enlightenment, so named because it emphasized rationality, which led to the drive for political equality as the most rational way for states to govern. Two thinkers associated with the Enlightenment are [Thomas Jefferson](#) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, both of whom were instrumental in encouraging the cause of democracy over the rule of monarchs, and their writings contributed to the motivations behind the American and French Revolutions. The Enlightenment produced intellectual philosophers, and the art of the period was called Neo-Classical because it incorporated the logic, order, and balance of classical Greek art. (Neo-Classicism

co-occurs with explorations of Greek and Roman ruins in Greece and Italy.)

Many historians recognize the start of the Romantic Period as occurring about 1800, when William Wordsworth set forth a new theory of poetry in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. The Preface summarizes some important traits of Romanticism: an emphasis on feeling as the source of creativity, a preference for subjectivity, an overall devotion to nature as a symbolic code for spiritual truth, and a desire to give voice to oppressed and rustic people. [Poetry](#) Wordsworth said, "is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings ... recollected in tranquility." Poetry, then, is the expression of human feeling as it is remembered and continues to be felt. In the shadow of the [French Revolution](#) English writers like [William Blake](#) and Samuel Coleridge expressed similar sensibilities.

The second phase of Romanticism, from 1805 to the 1830s, produced other writers associated with the term, the most famous of whom are [John Keats](#) Percy Shelley, and Lord Byron (born George Gordon). In addition to stressing feeling, writers continued an earlier interest in national history and folklore. [Sir Walter Scott](#) wrote historical novels about legendary English characters; John Keats (as well as many others) rewrote the Robin Hood legends; and Tennyson focused on the tales of the Knights of the Round Table. Another relevant element is an interest in the occult and in morbidity; Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's [Frankenstein](#) is an example as are the nightmarish visions in the poetry of the U.S. writer Edgar Allan Poe.

The Lady of Shalott: Critical Overview

Tennyson's early poems are not often analyzed by twentieth-century critics because his later pieces are considered much more thought provoking: as early as 1895, George Saintsbury noted that "'The Lady of Shalott' does not count among the poems that established Tennyson's title to the first rank of English poets." Still, to the same critic, it is one of the poet's "happiest" pieces, not because of the subject matter—after all, a curse kills the Lady in the end—but because of Tennyson's skillful use of words. "There is such a latent charm in mere words, cunning collocations, and in the voice ringing in them," famed poet [Walt Whitman](#) wrote, "which [Tennyson] caught and has brought out, beyond all others." Among the poems that he goes on to list as examples of this is "The Lady of Shalott."

Though its subject matter is considered by scholars to be light, there has been no denying that it was influential in its time and is probably responsible for other works of art with similar themes. Critic John D. Jump noted in his 1974 book about Tennyson that "The Lady of Shalott" shows how readily [Tennyson's language] can give access to that medieval dream world which attracted so many nineteenth-century writers and painters. Arthur Noyse noted that "his early Arthurian poems practically founded the pre-Raphaelite school in England." Whatever impression the modern reader has of Camelot and the age of chivalry, it probably bears some influence from Tennyson and the stunning pictures of that long-ago time that he painted with his words.

The Lady of Shalott: Essays and Criticism

Differences between Tennyson's 1833 and 1842 Versions of Poem

The story told in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem "The Lady of Shalott" obviously lacks a key narrative element, making it, at least in theory, a flawed attempt at storytelling. Handled less skillfully, it might easily have been rejected by readers and literary critics as a weak attempt to use powerful language to make up for its storytelling deficiencies. The poem concerns a damsel who lives in a stone tower, threatened by a curse that she knows, somehow, will kill her if she looks out her window at the world that surrounds her. The curse

is real; she does look, and she dies. The basic question that must go through the mind of anyone who reads this poem is how the curse came to be. Tennyson could not have failed to notice what an important aspect of the story he left out.

Assuming, then, that Tennyson left this crucial information out on purpose, it is very likely that he had that same purpose in mind while making changes to the poem between the first and second published versions, dated, respectively, 1833 and 1842. Neither version could have been written with the goal of writing a clear story, not with that glaring omission, and the revision does nothing to fill in the missing details. But adding up all of these oddities draws a line to Tennyson's true purpose. A comparison between the two versions shows more than just corrections or adjustments in the 1842 revision. The later version is even more mysterious than the original, which, unexpectedly, makes it more human.

The main reason that this poem is able to successfully present a magic spell without explaining why or how that spell occurred is its setting. The story takes place in Camelot, a mythical land that, if it ever actually existed, certainly was not the kingdom that the ancient stories present. Popular imagination has attached itself to the historical facts, adding stories about Merlin the sorcerer, the Lady of the Lake, and the magical Sword in the Stone, Excalibur, that could only be handled by a person who was good and wise. Because magic is, by its very definition, outside of the ordinary laws of nature, there is a tendency to accept it as unknowable and to leave issues of magic unexamined.

But it is wrong to assume that magic has no rules at all. Like the myths of ancient Greece and Rome, the medieval stories of the Knights of the Round Table used magic to pass judgements on morality. For example, Odysseus's ten-year journey home from the Trojan War was said to have been caused by his failing to properly offer a homage to the god Poseidon. Similarly, Lancelot, Camelot's bravest and most chivalrous knight, is not able to find the coveted Holy Grail because of his affair with Arthur's wife, Guinevere. Thus the honor of finding the Grail is passed to Lancelot's son. The major difference is that the Greek myths were based on religious customs, while the magic involved in the Arthurian legends affirmed Christian principles. Saying that the curse on the Lady of Shalott is "magical" does not remove the need for a cause, even if it helps to dampen readers' curiosity.

In both versions of this poem, Tennyson worked against natural human curiosity, tweaking it without satisfying it. Doing so tells readers that the details surrounding the curse are really not important to his message. In some ways, Tennyson's method anticipates [Modernism](#) which did not actually develop until the 1920s. The First World War (1914-1918) was so catastrophic that it changed many systems of thought, including literary theory. The Modernist poetry that resulted did more than just dictate poetic information to readers and invite them to appreciate the poet's verbal skill: it acknowledged that readers are aware that they are reading a poem that somebody wrote. "The Lady of Shalott" counts on its readers to be aware of its author's existence and to wonder about the thought process that led him to leave out critical information. The only sensible explanation that readers can arrive at is that he means to downplay the mystical aspect of this myth and to focus attention on the psychology of the character who is the poem's focus.

There are only a few differences between the version of the poem published in 1833 and Tennyson's 1842 revision, but, surprisingly, they serve to make the setting and the character even more obscure. Usually, poetry tries to render a vivid experience, and so an author's changes often serve to make the visual experience clearer, not hazier. Again, the assumption must be that Tennyson is trying to push the irrelevant aspects deeper into the background, with the hope that readers will focus more on personality than on situation.

The 1833 version of the poem tells readers what the Lady of Shalott looks like in two extended passages. The first is in the poem's fourth stanza, at the end of the first section. Details bring her to life, giving her an actual, physical presence. "A pearl-garland winds her head," the poem explains: "She leaneth on a velvet bed, / Fully royally appareled, / The Lady of Shalott." At this point the revision, which follows the same general shape,

describes the reaper in the field, listening to her song, rather than describing her looks. This brings in more a sense of the surrounding world, less a sense of the Lady.

The earlier version also has an entire stanza of physical description that Tennyson later removed. After the first stanza of the fourth section, after she has already come out of the castle, written her name on the boat, and climbed into it to float down river, the original poem says:

A cloudwhite crown of pearl she dight,
All raimented in snowy wight
That loosely flew, (her zone in sight,
Clasped with one blinding diamond bright,)
Though the squally eastwind keenly
Blew, with folded arms serenely
By the water stood the queenly Lady of Shalott.

This version is specific about her clothes, her posture, and her general demeanor. The 1842 version is not only less descriptive about her looks, but it removes any detail about her visual presence altogether.

Another part that changed from one version to the next was the poem's initial emphasis on death. The early version is much more graphic; in the stanza before the last it includes the lines, "A pale, pale corpse she floated by, / Deadcold, between the houses high, / Dead toward Camelot." The corresponding lines in the revised version read, "A gleaming shape she floated by, / Dead-pale between the houses high, / Silent into Camelot." The revised poem does mention death, indicating that Tennyson's intention remained to be clear that she dies. Yet the emphasis on death in the newer version is softened, which shifts its emphasis from spectacle to meditation.

W. David Shaw, in a 1976 essay for the Cornell University Press, noted that the two versions highlight the ways in which Tennyson "wavers between the impulse to write poems of pure sensation ... and his impulse to test and enlarge his poetry." Shaw uses this difference to show differences in poetic theory from the Romantic period and the Victorian period (Queen Victoria took the throne in 1837, right between these two versions). Without even considering the significance to literary history of these two versions of the poem, it is still interesting to consider the two motives that Shaw attributes to Tennyson: the earlier version, the one that emphasizes death and the maiden's looks, is the one that he calls poetry written for "pure sensation," and in fact it is the one that gives the most chilling sensation.

Ultimately, each version is defined by its final lines. The first time the poem was published, the last stanza focused on the local people, referred to earlier in both versions as the "surly village-churls," who gather around the boat in amazement at the sight of a beautiful dead woman that they do not know. Lancelot may or may not be with them in this earlier form; certainly, the germ of the idea of making him an observer was there because Tennyson mentions a knight in the assembled crowd. This version ends with a quote from the Lady, written on a parchment that rests on her breast: "The web was woven curiously, / The charm is broken utterly, / Draw near and fear not—this is I, / The Lady of Shalott." The version of 1842, of course, has Lancelot approach the boat and presents his words, not hers, in the last few lines. He comments on her lovely face. Instead of the simple pathos of the baffled farm people finding out about her existence from a note that she has pinned to herself in death, something like a suicide note to strangers, the revision brings the story around to the person who unwittingly caused her death. It is mysterious and somewhat ironic in itself, but the true humanizing element is in the fact that Lancelot is attracted to her, perhaps as much as she was to him, but that neither of them will ever know.

In both versions of this poem, Tennyson managed to skirt the central issue of what it is that kills the Lady of Shalott. For those who take the poem at face value, believing the events as they are given, she is killed by a

curse, one that the Lady knows specific details about but that Tennyson does not share with his readers. A cynic who does not believe in magic can read the curse as being symbolic for some psychological state that keeps her from social interaction, one that Lancelot's beautiful singing voice draws her from, but that does little to explain why she would be this way. The most satisfying clues to why Tennyson chose to do it this way come from the changes he made while revising. Removing the most graphic signs of death and corpses gives more leeway for interpreting her "death" as a symbolic consequence for leaving her safe abode. Removing her physical presence takes the poem even further from reality, forcing readers to imagine her, giving the whole situation a more unreal setting, as a drama that plays out in her mind instead of in the physical world. And bringing Lancelot in at the end stresses the conflict between the Lady's view of the world and the world's view of her. In the first reality, she and Camelot exist beside each other with no interaction, but Lancelot's interest in her in the revised view implies an emotional bond that did exist but that was cut down by this mysterious curse. Readers do not need to know what this curse is in order to feel sorry for the Lady of Shalott and for Lancelot, and, by extension, for all of humanity.

Source: David Kelly, Critical [Essay](#) on "The Lady of Shalott," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002. Kelly is an adjunct professor of creative writing and literature at Oakton Community College and an associate professor of literature and creative writing at College of Lake County and has written extensively for academic publishers.

"Cracked from Side to Side": Sexual Politics in "The Lady of Shalott"

Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" (1842) is often read by critics as a poem centrally concerned with the question of the relation between "art" and "life," conditions respectively symbolized in the worlds of Shalott and "many-towered Camelot." The poem resolves this question, it is usually argued, by the recognition that "life" is inherently antipathetic to the possibility of an ongoing artistic production—an insight taken in turn to be enacted by the death which befalls the Lady who gives the poem its title in the course of her attempted sortie from the one realm of the poem to the other. A paradigmatic formulation of this canonical approach is provided by Walter E. Houghton and G. Robert Stange in their anthology, *Victorian Poetry and Poetics* (1959). According to their notes to the poem, "The Lady of Shalott" suggests

that the artist must remain in aloof detachment, observing life only in the mirror of the imagination, not mixing in it directly. Once the artist attempts to lead the life of ordinary men his poetic gift, it would seem, dies.

So persistent is this view that Alastair W. Thomson similarly claims, thirty years later, that Tennyson's poem "represents the dilemma of the introspective artist, condemned to a life of shadows, and risking destruction if he turns to reality."

No reading is ideologically innocent, however—least of all a canonical one (which, in these instances, also blithely turns the "she" of the text into the "he" of its readers)—and the ideology of approaches which see "The Lady of Shalott" as a proto-Yeatsian allegory of choice between "Perfection of the life, or of the work," might be described as implicitly "utilitarian": by reading Tennyson's poem as "a myth of the poetic imagination" and concluding that the artist/poet must remain antithetically and irrevocably divorced from "life," the critic simultaneously consigns the text to just that condition of purely aesthetic limbo which largely defines the Lady's plight throughout the poem.

What the canonical/utilitarian approach fails to take into account, in other words, is the question of the relation of the poem itself to "life"—its implication, that is, in the specificities of its own historical moment. Hence it remains blind to the existence of a certain conflict between what "The Lady of Shalott" says about

the art/life relation and the way in which that relation is instantiated and configured by the text itself. At the level of the symbolic narrative within the poem, art and life would indeed seem to be fatally opposed to one another and the text to offer a reluctant manifesto for the romantically isolated poet. Yet, as Joseph Chadwick has shown, "The Lady of Shalot" itself constitutes an art-work produced and indeed enabled—albeit obliquely—through an active engagement with its own contemporary moment. For Chadwick, "despite the feudal setting of the poem ... it is Tennyson's *own social order*, not the one from which he drew the Lady and Lancelot" that creates "the problems of autonomy and privacy [the poem] confronts." In this respect, the dialogue of the poem with its historical context ironically refutes the necessity for aesthetic withdrawal from "life" or history which it appears internally to affirm. Far from being mutually exclusive, what Tennyson's poem conversely demonstrates is that art and life, the aesthetic and the political, are fully interwoven: the involvement in the social world which is symbolically the destination of the Lady in the poem is, from the first, a condition at which the poem has already arrived. As such, "The Lady of Shalott" bears out Alan Sinfield's contention that "even poetry which appears to be remote from political issues is in fact involved in the political life of its society."

One of the concerns at the heart of the political (as well as intellectual, social, and cultural) life of Tennyson's nineteenth-century context is, as criticism generally acknowledges, the "Woman Question." While "The Lady of Shalott" addresses this question, it does so, as will be shown, in a systematically ambivalent manner, at once upholding and dislocating patriarchal assumptions about the issues which the question entails—those of gender, sexuality, the institution of marriage, and the space occupied by women in society.

I

As befits a text whose operations are profoundly equivocal, the landscape into which "The Lady of Shalott" draws its reader is one precisely ordered in terms of opposition and division: "On either side the river lie / Long fields of barley and of rye." Yet the opening description of place includes a detail whose effect is to disrupt the coherence of another opposition—between illusion and reality—which is central to the organization of symbolic space within the poem as a whole. While firmly divided from one another, Tennyson's "fields," we are told, nonetheless "meet the sky" fashioning a conjunction which, as Edgar F. Shannon, Jr. points out, is purely the result of an optical illusion. Though the text seeks to confine the presence of illusions solely to "The island of Shalott", it is evident from the outset that they exist in realms beyond its boundaries. Even before the opposition between "the silent isle" and Camelot can develop into an opposition between "the region of shadows [and] that of realities," the latter opposition is itself being skeptically revealed as illusory, problematic, in some way flawed.

Tensions between the setting up and upsetting of distinctions are operative not only in terms of the relation between illusion and reality but also at the level of the representation of gender difference in the poem, raising—as such—the question of its sexual politics. Feminist criticism maintains that the categories of gender (as opposed to sex)—"masculinity" and "femininity"—are not naturally or self-evidently given but instead ideologically produced by society and culture. Insofar as these categories are at the same time hierarchically organized in favor of men, the ground of their production is, as feminism also argues, a patriarchal one. The ideological sleight-of-hand by which patriarchy mystifies or tropes the cultural as the natural (thus preserving its dominion) is neatly summarized by Griselda Pollock:

Patriarchy does not refer to the static, oppressive domination by one sex over another, but to a web of psycho-social relationships which institute a socially significant difference on the axis of sex which is so deeply located in our very sense of lived, sexual, identity that it appears to us as natural and unalterable.

The way in which the relations between the sexes, which constitute power-relations also, are ideally woven for and by patriarchy is itself graphically outlined in a passage from Tennyson's *The Princess: A Medley*, published in 1847, five years after the appearance of the revised version of "The Lady of Shalott":

Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
Man for the sword and for the needle she:
Man with the head and woman with the heart:
Man to command and woman to obey;
All else confusion.

These lines return us, by contrast, to "The Lady of Shalott," a text whose stance toward patriarchal ideology is substantially less didactic than that propounded by the old king—the Prince's father—who is their speaker.

At first glance, however, it would appear that, despite the medievalism of the poem, the disposition of social space in "The Lady of Shalott" accurately replicates, as the citation from Chadwick implies, the gender conventions informing Victorian society. On the one hand, the Lady is consigned to a private and socially peripheral space of "Four gray walls, and four gray towers," located on the far side of a "margin, willow-veiled", while on the other, the public realm of Camelot is inhabited by "bold Sir Lancelot": mythic past conforms to socio-historic present, as private and public spaces are respectively identified with "femininity" and "masculinity" in both.

Considered as a response to the patriarchal norms embodied in the Shalott/Camelot opposition, the inclination of Tennyson's poem appears—from the perspective of narrative structure—to be to support and maintain them. While the central action in the text concerns the Lady's attempted performance of a crossing from private/"feminine" to public/"masculine" worlds, this movement is one which, strictly speaking, goes uncompleted, or is permitted to occur only posthumously:

For ere she reached upon the tide
The first house by the water-side,
Singing in her song she died,
The Lady of Shalott.

Intercepting the Lady's crossing by means of death, the narrative of the poem registers its own resistance to the transgression of gender divisions—and hence the possibility of political change—of which that crossing is the sign.

As the index of resistance to such a possibility, the death which the text eventually imposes upon the Lady is only the formal or explicit culmination of a process which commences much earlier. This process works, through a series of strategies, to transform the future toward which the Lady travels into a repetition of the past she seeks to escape, thus creating the illusion that the patriarchally subversive crossing from Shalott to Camelot is itself illusory, since a future that repeats a past effectively erases the present that ordinarily facilitates the passage from one to the other. The first of these strategies occurs precisely at the point, in fact, at which the Lady prepares to leave Shalott: "She left the web, she left the loom, / She made three paces through the room." If these lines retard even the motion they describe—the Lady's crossing of her studio—through syntactic repetition, arresting "paces" into stasis, they are similarly and secondly followed by the typographical effacement of the larger crossing from Shalott to Camelot in the shape of the blank space between the third and fourth sections of the poem. The Lady's emergence on the other side of this space is accompanied by a sudden shift in seasons—from "the blue unclouded weather" of summer to autumn:

In the stormy east-wind straining,
The pale yellow woods were waning,
The broad stream in his banks complaining,
Heavily the low sky raining
Over towered Camelot;
Down she came and found a boat.

With this shift, as Chadwick notes, the Lady "finds a world just as gray as the one she has left", as the future again repeats the past.

The pattern of temporal inversion and elision we are outlining constitutes, to recapitulate, a kind of proleptic supplement to that resistance to the (ideologically disruptive) crossing from Shalott to Camelot which is made textually explicit with the Lady's death at lines 150-153. This pattern extends to include a further detail. Though, at line 115, the Lady's mirror is dramatically "cracked from side to side," it would appear, at line 130, to have been uncannily restored, in the figuration of her face—newly directed toward Camelot—as a "*glassy* countenance" (emphasis added). The effect of this detail—like that of those noted above—is implicitly to invert the Lady's *voyage d'amour*, slyly fold it back upon itself. Not only blocking the transition from Shalott to Camelot with death but also signaling its resistance to the subversion of patriarchal values which that action connotes through a range of subliminal gestures, "The Lady of Shalott" thus fairly lucidly confirms Arthur Hallam's definition of the contemporary poetic impulse as "a check acting for conservation against a propulsion toward change".

But the paradox which appears to render the strategies of resistance in the poem superfluous is that while the movement from Shalott to Camelot, "feminine" to "masculine" spaces, is symbolically transgressive, the desire which initially prompts it would seem, at the end of the second section of the poem, to be entirely compatible with patriarchal norms:

But in her web she still delights
To weave the mirror's magic sights,
For often through the silent nights
A funeral, with plumes and lights
And music, went to Camelot:
Or when the moon was overhead,
Came two young lovers lately wed;
'I am half sick of shadows,' said
The Lady of Shalott.

The "natural" reading of the last four lines of this stanza (alleged by Hallam Tennyson to contain "the key to this tale of 'magic symbolism'" is one which turns the Lady's cry, "'I am half sick of shadows,'" in the direction of an unequivocally confessional desire to substitute participation in the lived reality of marital love for the contemplation of its image. Even as the Lady's movement from Shalott to Camelot figures the deregulation of patriarchal gender codes and is variously resisted by the text, the desire which propels it—being for marriage—seems to work to reestablish the text in a relation of continuity with the patriarchal status quo.

Yet to define the Lady's discontent with the conditions of her existence as stemming from the self-conscious recognition of marriage as the telos of her desire is to mask the inscription of a subversive counter-meaning beneath the conformities of the textual surface of the poem, converting it into an instance of the Barthesian text of *plaisir* "that comes from culture and does not break with it, [and] is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading." As frequently noted, it is possible to translate the predicament described in "The Lady of Shalott" into the terms of a neo-Platonic allegory. Just as in the tenth book of Plato's [Republic](#), the work of art duplicates a reality itself only the copy of a higher realm of "essences," so the labor of the female artist in Tennyson's text is the weaving of the "magic web" out of the images which appear in her mirror as "shadows of the world", the reality of Camelot. But this is by no means to exhaust the allegorical potential of Tennyson's poem. As the site of the production of images—one of which is that of the newlyweds—which effectively are reality for the one whom they entrap, the Lady's "mirror clear" is not only analogous to the Platonic realm of "appearances" (figured, in Republic Book 7, as the wall of a cave on which the shadows of the absolute manifest themselves) but also to the mediation of experience by the processes of ideological re-presentation. In the contest of the construction of gender, these processes operate, as Pollock puts it,

by means of winning our identification with the versions of masculinity and femininity which are represented to us ... binding us into a particular—but always unstable—regime of sexual difference.

"All else confusion." To view the Lady's mirror from this perspective, seeing its "magic sights" as the mesmeric products of ideology, is equally to lead her cry in a different—indeed antithetical—direction to that which the "natural" reading comfortably assigns to it. Far from signaling a desire for marriage, the declaration "I am half sick of shadows" comes to seem symptomatic of a suggestive—and subversive—demystification of the institution of marriage as adequately expressive of female desire, sexual or otherwise. In the same way that the Lady's mirror hosts a panoply of images which significantly does not include her own, so Tennyson's poem covertly suggests its heroine's failure to identify herself with the patriarchal ideology which precisely posits marriage as integral to the completion of the destinies of women within Victorian society. Appropriately, the non-accommodation of the female subject to the narrative of an orthodox "femininity" occurs "when the moon [is] overhead," a moment symbolically associated, through the moon's own culturally defined link with menstruation, with one of the aspects of womanhood which Victorian definitions of "femininity" tend to repress.

Signifying as much the rejection of as the desire for marriage-as-telos, the Lady's utterance discloses a "key" which aporetically turns—like the poem as a whole—in two directions at the same time, both toward and away from patriarchy. If, as Tennyson instructs Boyd Carpenter, "the thought within the image is much more than any one interpretation", the effect of the subtextual excess at this point is subversively to expose a certain disjunction between the female subject and the construction or interpellation of that subject as "feminine" by patriarchal ideology. In so doing it also discloses the rationale which governs those apparently supererogatory strategies of resistance to the transition from Shalott to Camelot discussed above.

II

Gestures toward the subversion of the gender positions which patriarchal ideology seeks to promote, in Pollock's phrase, as "natural and unalterable" are additionally inscribed throughout the text in a number of ways, the first of which occurs at the end of the opening section of the poem:

But who hath seen her wave her hand?
Or at the casement seen her stand?
Or is she known in all the land,
The Lady of Shalott?

Only reapers, reaping early
In among the bearded barley,
Hear a song that echoes cheerly
From the river winding clearly,
Down to towered Camelot:
And by the moon the reaper weary,
Piling sheaves in uplands airy,
Listening, whispers 'Tis the fairy
Lady of Shalott.'

As Herbert F. Tucker points out (following Lionel Stevenson), Tennyson's image of the Lady as an invisible singer defines her as a figure for the Romantic poet derived from Shelley's "To a Skylark" and particularly from the Shelleyan comparison of the "blithe Spirit" his poem eulogizes to a "high-born maiden / In a palace-tower." But, as Tucker also notes, the lines cited above simultaneously incorporate an allusion to Wordsworth and "The Solitary Reaper." Thus alluding to Shelley and Wordsworth, Tennyson's poem is itself as much "a song that echoes" as that produced by the disembodied voice within it. But the Tennysonian echo

of Wordsworth is an echo with what turns out to be a sexual difference, closer in fact to a kind of intertextual mirroring or simultaneous play of reflection and inversion. In Wordsworth's poem it is the male poet who listens—effectively transfixed—to the song of a female reaper, but in "The Lady of Shalott" we encounter a male reaper who hearkens, equally spellbound, to the song of a female poet, "the fairy/Lady of Shalott." Tennyson's poem reproduces the Wordsworthian poet/reaper configuration but inverts it at the level of gender, placing the poet on the female side of the opposition and the reaper on the male side. The transgression of gender boundaries which "The Lady of Shalott" both symbolizes and blocks is discretely carried out by means of allusion as the poem unsettles the ideological fixities it vies equally to sustain.

Subversiveness of allusion is complemented in the penultimate stanza of the third section of the poem by a subversiveness of refrain. Prior to this point, and for the most part beyond it, the refrains of the poem are consistently organized in terms of strict gender distinctions. In each stanza the first refrain, located at its center, is reserved for references either to Camelot or Lancelot, while the second, located at the end or "margin" of the stanza, is given over to Shalott and the Lady. While the distribution of refrains in the poem could itself be said to be patriarchal (identifying the "masculine" as central and marginalizing the "feminine"), the customary pattern is significantly and symbolically usurped at this juncture, since it is a reference to Lancelot that appears in the space traditionally allocated to the "feminine":

From the bank and from the river
He flashed into the crystal mirror,
'Tirra lirra,' by the river
Sang Sir Lancelot.

Though Lancelot lacks the "sword" essential to the conception of manhood outlined by the old king in [The Princess](#), he is nonetheless constantly defined through images of phallic power. Distanced from the Lady's "bower-eaves" by a "bow-shot," he rides a "war-horse" that suggestively parts the "barley-sheaves", he possesses a "blazoned baldric" and "mighty silver bugle", his "helmet and...helmet-feather" burn "like one burning flame together", and he is likened to a "bearded meteor, trailing light." Yet despite the emphatically phallic terms in which the person of Lancelot is represented, he is here transferred to a space the refrain-structure of the poem defines as "feminine." As with the allusion to Wordsworth, "The Lady of Shalott" obliquely accomplishes, in terms of refrain, that re-inscription of gender boundaries which it both threatens and thwarts at the level of its symbolic narrative. Moreover, the resituating of Lancelot—his crossing from one side of the gender line operative at the level of the refrain to the other—is preceded by the utterance "'Tirra lirra.'" While the context from which it is taken (Autolycus' song in [The Winter's Tale](#) 4.3) endows it with the connotations of a promiscuous male sexuality, the shape of the utterance—being that of a "feminine" rhyme—has the precisely subversive counter-effect of unmanning the singer. As with Lancelot, so with the Lady who parallels and indeed surpasses his movement into the space the structure of the poem reserves for the "feminine" with her own threefold penetration ("She looked down to Camelot," "Did she look to Camelot," "She floated down to Camelot," into that which it ordinarily sets aside for all things "masculine."

The strategies by which the text might thus be said to "loose the chain" that binds men and women to the fixity of patriarchally conceived gender divisions ("a particular—but always unstable—regime of sexual difference") take an alternative form at lines: if Lancelot is "feminized" by refrain (and rhyme) the Lady is here analogously "masculinized" by the simile which likens her to "some bold seer in a trance / Seeing all *his own* mischance" (emphasis added), an effect underscored by the transposition of an epithet previously applied to Lancelot ("bold") to the visionary to whom she is compared.

In his essay-review of Tennyson's first published volume of poetry, Hallam praises the poet as one who (unlike Keats and Shelley) "comes before the public, unconnected with any political party, or peculiar system of opinions." But if the notion of "coming before the public" creates a curiously prophetic identification between the poet of *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830) and the eponymous heroine of "The Lady of Shalott"

(originally published in 1832), the Lady in turn suggests herself to be a figure for the politics—particularly the sexual politics—of the poem in which she is located. Just as the Lady makes an enigmatic debut before her public, "A gleaming shape she floated by, / Dead-pale between the houses high, / Silent into Camelot", so Tennyson's poem finds itself negotiating opposed political impulses—reaction and subversion, the weaving and the unthreading of the "web" of patriarchal ideology.

III

One of the most significant ways in which "The Lady of Shalott" manifests its politically self-divided stance toward the values of patriarchal ideology—colluding with and critiquing them at once—is by means of what might be called a discourse of the gaze. For patriarchy the difference between "masculine" and "feminine" sexuality is articulated in terms of a difference between activity and passivity. These differences are in turn rehearsed at the scopic level where the gaze—the act of looking—is identified with a "masculine" (rather than "necessarily male") subject-position while women come, as the silent and passive objects of the gaze (and the "masculine" desire of which it is the sign), to occupy the site of the "feminine" and are as such denied the possibility of experiencing themselves as actively desiring subjects.

Tennyson's poem begins its reflections on the gaze and the question of sexual power-relations to which it gives rise in the opening stanza:

And up and down the people go,
Gazing where the lilies blow
Round an island there below,
The island of Shalott.

Though the "Gazing" described here appears not to be gender-specific (it is collectively the practice of "people"), the poem nonetheless already suggests that the relation between gaze and object within its mythic realm is ordered in terms of a conventionally patriarchal logic, since the object of the popular gaze is "where the lilies blow ... / The island of Shalott," locus of the central—if obscure—female figure of the poem. The complementary identification of the gaze with a "masculine" subject-position which this implies is made explicit in the next stanza:

Four gray walls, and four gray towers,
Overlook a space of flowers,
And the silent isle imbowers
The Lady of Shalott.

Displaced onto "Four gray walls, and four gray towers" that "Overlook a space of flowers," the gaze begins to emerge as a form of phallic surveillance of the female subject (or object) for which the "space of flowers" functions as a metonymy.

While the text thus appears to validate patriarchal structures by mapping the gaze/object relation in terms of an opposition between "masculine" and "feminine," it also subversively exposes the ideologically constructed nature of the "feminine," thereby circumscribing the claims for mastery—both erotic and epistemological—which men make over women. While the action of Tennyson's phallically gazing towers is to "Overlook" the field of their vision in the sense of surveying it from a higher position, they seem equally not to be all-seeing, to "Overlook" being not only to survey but also to fail to apprehend or recognize. The doubleness of the language of the poem shows the "masculine" gaze to be in a significant sense a blind or "castrated" one. The implication is that the way in which men like to see women—viewing and representing them, for example, as "feminine" objects of desire—is indistinguishable from a process of not seeing them, imprisoning the female within a set of culturally constructed images from which, paradoxically, it will always already have escaped: "woman," as Julia Kristeva argues, constitutes "something that cannot be represented,

something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies."

The question of the (non)representation of women is quite literally posed by the lines already cited from the third stanza of the poem:

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?

In the context of the blindness of the "masculine" gaze toward the female subject—which it typically chooses to see as a "feminine" object—the Lady's literal and particular failure to appear "at the casement" constitutes the ironic symbol of the generalized respect in which "woman," in the Kristevan sense, can only appear, as opposed to being ever plainly manifest or knowable, either within the space of representation for which the casement is a figure or on the horizon of the patriarchal gaze that frames her.

But if she is an unseen presence (as "woman" for Kristeva is always effaced) Tennyson's Lady is crucially unseeing also, interdicted from assuming the gaze, the "masculine" position of erotically desiring subject, by the threat of a "curse" which, like her mirror indeed, "hangs before her all the year":

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.

Though the Lady herself is ignorant of the nature of the curse, its meaning and *raison d'être* are readily enough decipherable from the perspective of the analysis in the poem of the workings of patriarchal ideology. For the Lady to appropriate the gaze would be for her to effect the crossing of the patriarchal gender line from "feminine" to "masculine" and so to precipitate, through an act of female self-empowerment, the "confusion" to which the lines cited from *The Princess* refer and which her own poem both adumbrates and symbolically moves to oppose in causing the attempted transition from Shalott to Camelot to issue only in death, product of the curse.

Under these conditions, indirectly imposed by the anonymous "whisper," the Lady must herself mediate her gaze via the mirror:

And moving through a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear.
There she sees the highway near
Winding down to Camelot.

The mirror is not only the site of "shadows" but also of light, that which bestows definition and shape upon objects and, as Isobel Armstrong puts it, "enables perception to occur." It is precisely the quality of light, as much as phallic power, with which Lancelot is associated throughout the third section of the poem—from the moment that the sun flames upon his "brazen greaves" to the brilliant crisis of his double reflection: "From the

bank and from the river, / He flashed into the crystal mirror." Thus constituted as a phallic figure of light, Lancelot personifies the very processes of patriarchal ideology, whose labor frames and fashions women (and men).

Though these processes in part entail the positioning of women as silently "other," passive objects to the "masculine" gaze, the poem, at lines 109-117, violently inverts these conditions:

She left the web, she left the loom,
She made three paces through the room,
She *saw* the water-lily bloom,
She *saw* the helmet and the plume,
She *looked down* to Camelot.
Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror cracked from side to side;
'The curse is come upon me,' cried
The Lady of Shalott. (emphases added)

Appropriating the gaze, the Lady enters the position of the desiring subject and so enacts—at the scopic level—the crossing from "feminine" to "masculine" gender positions originally figured in the projected foray from Shalott to Camelot. In this respect her action not only results in cracking the mirror literally, but also embodies an overturning of that for which the mirror is the figure—the ideological status quo. But if the literal mirror is subsequently found to be magically mended in the fantasmatic shape of the Lady's "glassy countenance," to what extent does the text duplicate this process in terms of the mirror-as-figure? How comprehensive, in other words, are its attempts to salvage the patriarchal gender images beyond which the iconoclasm of the Lady's gaze momentarily advances her?

Insofar as it equips her with a "glassy countenance" at all, it would seem that the intent of the text, at the beginning of its fourth and final part, is to restore the ideological mirror, since to "look to Camelot" with eyes of glass is not to see at all and for the Lady to become the precise opposite of what she had previously fleetingly been—not subject but object. Yet if she is thus objectified (and the continuity of the text with patriarchal values therefore reasserted) the Lady nonetheless retains a glimmer of transformative potential, being, at least until "her eyes [are] darkened wholly," an object of a particular kind—a looking-glass in fact, a mirror. As such, the Lady constitutes a reflective surface by dint of which the one who gazes into it (Lancelot) may behold himself in the act of seeing. In this respect she might be said to possess the capacity for inducing in the "masculine" gaze a certain self-consciousness as to its own strategies, a recognition of its own blindness with regard to the female subject and female sexuality and of the truth that the way in which men traditionally view women is critically discrepant from how women see themselves.

To the degree that it contains the elements of a critique of patriarchal ideology, "The Lady of Shalott" seeks, equally, to bring about—for the (male) Victorian reader for whom Lancelot is surrogate—just such an altered vision of the relations between men and women. Within the myth within the text, however, the revolutionary moment is badly missed:

But Lancelot mused a little space;
He said, 'She has a lovely face;
God in his mercy lend her grace,
The Lady of Shalott.'

Though Lancelot reflects "a little space," perhaps briefly speculating upon the possibility of seeing women other than patriarchally, he evidently does not reflect long enough, going on to re-articulate, with "'She has a lovely face,'" the orthodox perception of women as the object of the "masculine" gaze.

From this vantage it appears that the lazy blessing Lancelot confers upon the Lady at the conclusion of the poem is no better than a disguised version of the curse drawn into operation at the end of the third part of the poem, since the latter is elaborated precisely in terms of her transportation back across the gender line, from "masculine" to "feminine" positions, subject to object of the gaze, "Who" to "what":

And at the closing of the day
She loosed the chain and down she lay;
The broad stream bore her far away,
The Lady of Shalott.
Lying, robed in snowy white
That loosely flew to left and right—
The leaves upon her falling light—
Through the noises of the night
She floated down to Camelot.

No longer the bold "see-er" she once had been, the Lady's course is emphatically re-assimilated to the criteria of the "femininity" she had previously violated—even "her blood," at line 147, is "frozen slowly," in a detail which suggests, amid this poem of moons and curses, a repression of menstruation as "unfeminine." "Lying, robed in snowy white," she becomes the very bride—submissive and virginal, desired not desiring—whose image had traversed her mirror to such equivocal effect at the end of the second section of the poem.

But if this passage seems to avenge female self-empowerment it goes on to counter its own actions. Recollecting lines 64-72, in which the socially symbolic rituals of marriage and death are arbitrarily juxtaposed, the text now transforms the one into the other: groom Lancelot, whose "bridle bells" not only ring, but also merrily pun at line 85 ("bridle"/"bridal") becomes a reaper, the lady her own elegist:

And as the boat-head wound along
The willowy hills and fields among,
They heard her singing her last song,
The Lady of Shalott.
Heard a carol, mournful, holy,
Chanted loudly, chanted lowly,
Till her blood was frozen slowly,
And her eyes were darkened wholly,
Turned to towered Camelot.

In the context of the crossing from Shalott to Camelot, the supervention of death betokens, as we have seen, the reactionary orientation of the text, its resistance to the very questioning of the forms of patriarchal ideology which it seeks, conversely, to provoke at other levels. Yet the fact that the trajectory of death is at this point conflated with that of marriage has the effect of redefining—indeed reversing—the value of death-as-sign within the economy of the sexual politics of the poem. As a figure for marriage, death comes, that is, to re-open the ideologically dissentient potential of the poem by suggesting that marriage, far from entailing the fulfillment of each sex through the other (as in *The Princess*) is tantamount, for women, to a form of self-annihilation.

As a response to the questions which it raises, "The Lady of Shalott" proves itself, in the language of [In Memoriam](#), to be "A contradiction on the tongue" from first to last, simultaneously affirming and displacing those patriarchal visions of women and the relations between the sexes which held sway throughout the Victorian period and which are still today predominant. Thus exhibiting a sexual politics which is continually at odds with itself—being neither reactionary nor radical but both at once—Tennyson's poem emerges as no less centrally fractured, or "cracked from side to side," than the mirror within it, precisely unsure in fact as to quite

which side of its own covert political and socio-sexual debate it is on—that of patriarchy and reaction or women and subversion.

Source: Carl Plasa, "'Cracked from Side to Side': Sexual Politics in 'The Lady of Shalott,'" in *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 30, Nos. 3-4, Autumn-Winter 1992, pp. 247-61.

The Quest for the "Nameless" in Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott"

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.

The questions "Who is this and what is here?" that the fearful, dull-witted knights, burghers, lords, and ladies are left pondering are those questions which gaze back at the readers of "The Lady of Shalott" long after its fluent lines have drifted away from the closing of the poem. They place the almost unsuspecting audience among the citizens of Camelot, looking at the inscribed name and wondering what to do with it: Who is the Lady of Shalott, and what is the meaning of her presence in Camelot? These questions and the accompanying unease of possibly being identified among the citizens tempt the reader to separate himself from the curious and unknowing crowd, leave the wharf, and step into the Lady of Shalott's boat—as if to take her part. In this shift, he moves to an understanding, a reading, the impulses of which are similar to those that press the Lady through the poem from the tower, to the river, to Camelot. These impulses reflect the movement from the doubly enclosed, piecemeal images visible from the tower to the more continuous and definite vision of the last section of the poem. There is a desire within the reader to move from a fragmented and metonymic space to a metaphoric landscape in which the Lady becomes continuous with her surroundings. But the metaphoric vision eventually destroys itself and dies with the Lady. In the end, this destruction places the reader closer to Tennyson's dilemma, his difficulty in leaving the world and passing into a "Nameless," shadow-less realm.

To understand the reader's desire to insert himself into a metaphoric relationship with the poem and to comprehend his ultimate undoing, we need to consider the Lady of Shalott's unfolding, for in many ways the two movements are analogous. In the beginning of "The Lady of Shalott," images come and disappear as pieces and shadows of the world proceed through the Lady's mirror. Between these abbreviated images are spaces which syncopate the continuous weaving motion—the winding of the river and the road, the coming and going of the people—that tries to hold the lines of the poem together. These intervals frustrate the almost mechanical advance of the procession, and throughout the early parts of the poem, come to be more visible and compelling than the images, especially when Tennyson marks them in time and in synecdochic forms. For instance, it is only "Sometimes" or at particular times of the day ("when the moon was overhead" that the market girls, the village churls, a shepherd boy, a long-haired page, a knight or two, a funeral, and "two young lovers lately wed" enter and exit from the domain of the mirror. And, when they do, it is the pieces of these images which have separated themselves out that impress the eye and engage the gaze of the Lady. In her passive way, she sees only parts: the red cloaks of the market girls, the curly hair of the shepherd lad, the long hair of the page, and the plumes and lights of the funeral procession. These glide singly and separately through her mirror like the individual pulses of the shuttle sliding through the warp.

Surrounding the tower, pieces neither reaching nor touching one another accent the spaces between images. The tower overlooks "a space of flowers." The reader, though, does not have to wait until the second stanza to

experience these spaces, for immediately in the opening lines, Tennyson plunges him into a gap which divides the fields and allows him to see that "On either side the river lie / Long fields of barley and of rye," and involves him in the Lady's initial view of a world dominated by separateness and without promise of continuity and wholeness. There is little sense of a mutual dependency, a dialectic of opposites, between the whole and the part. One does not take life from the other. Rather the pieces dislocate the continuity and create a landscape in which there are openings and discontinuities. The fields which are "Long" and "meet the sky" would extend without a break if the river and the road travelling through and dividing them did not interfere. The water itself would flow "for ever" if "Little breezes" did not cut into the waves and create patches of movement. These synecdochic images must necessarily admit beginnings and endings, so a "margin, willow-veiled" borders and cuts off the river from all that surrounds it; water must separate the Lady, the tower, and the island from the fields. In this land of pieces a shallop skims by and disappears, and the Lady's voice, isolated from her, leaves the tower and comes surrounded by space and silence to the reapers below. The sounds render her presence by echoing her just as the mirror reflects.

In the early verses the vision is metonymic as well as synecdochic, for these single images are always succeeding one another. They do not flow into one another; rather they live for a moment until they are replaced by others—as soon as the shepherd-lad exits, the damsels arrive to occupy the space he had temporarily filled. The verses proceed as a procession. Without succession the cloth of the poem cannot hold. It is as if there were an attempt to weave a poem, though with broken lines and threads. If the Lady of Shalott does not constantly replace one image or thread with another, the tapestry and the poem must fly apart, as the tapestry does.

This synecdochic and metonymic vision is no different when Sir Lancelot enters in Part III. If anything his coming intensifies all that has passed before, for like his double reflection, his presence exaggerates this disjunction of a world dominated by parts and motivated by replacement. Even more distant from the land than the Lady in the tower, Lancelot and the rays of images shining from him seem to dangle and dazzle in open space ("The gemmy bridle glittered free"; "A mighty silver bugle" hangs from his "blazoned baldric"), and like an arrow released from the bow, Lancelot himself flashes by, cut off from all about him ("Some bearded meteor" moving "over still Shalott"). Tennyson's description of Lancelot, however, concentrates not only upon the successive and separated parts of his armor but also upon his movements with which, like the road and the river, he cuts through the fields ("He rode between the barley-sheaves") and divides the landscape. The effect of his action, though, is quite different from that of the road or the river, for Lancelot's brightness when coupled with the sun's brilliance ("The sun came dazzling through the leaves") seems paradoxically both to expand and fill the gaps of his passage. His glistening presence wounds the fields, yet simultaneously fills and heals the scar. One rapid, brilliant piece blends with another and for an instant the collective aura overwhelms all boundaries and divisions: "The helmet and the helmet-feather / Burned like one burning flame together." When Tennyson compares the knight's brilliance to a meteor that is "trailing light," these blended pieces even seem to melt away the frame of the mirror. Now continuity and wholeness seem as possible as the promise of eternal faithfulness depicted on Lancelot's shield (the knight "for ever" kneeling "To a lady." That momentary presence pushes the Lady from her loom, her mirror, from her synecdochic and metonymic space, and urges her and the poem forward.

Once the Lady's perspective shifts, so does the landscape. In the first three parts, images move horizontally across her static, vertical world; now, because she turns away and comes down, she moves horizontally through static, vertical structures. With that change come other inversions: instead of passively watching images move through her mirror, she becomes the image which passes through. Over becomes under as she glides into towered Camelot "Under tower and balcony." Echoes swell to full sounds; the fairy name takes on form and becomes the inscribed name; once empty skies and placid river swell with the rain. Action, fullness, and inscription replace passivity, emptiness, echoes, whispers, and rumour. The Lady emerges as a Lancelot: she gleams, she reflects, she is the one who is paradoxically to cut through and to remind the onlookers of the absence of wholeness, but she does it in a different manner. Of course, the analogy cannot be exact, for

Lancelot's initial dazzling, doubly-reflected presence brings at best a promise and at worst an illusion of the Lady's metaphoric vision. At the end he is not in the Lady's vessel but somewhere apart by "a little space" from both her and the citizens. His isolation, his continuing the creation of spaces between images, suggests that there is something hypocritical, even Satanic, about him. This hint of evil is not, as some would have it, because he is indifferent to the Lady but because he has knowledge of her and her metaphoric vision which he chooses to avoid. It is as if in remaining apart on the wharf, he stood beside Tennyson who could never quite let himself completely enter the Lady's vessel even though the impulse toward the mystical and non-representational was strong within him.

The Lady is different from Lancelot because when she leaves the tower, inscribes her name on the prow of the boat, and floats down the river to Camelot, she turns her back on the vision of her past and inserts herself into a metaphoric relationship with her surroundings and her self. With this shift, she moves into the spaces between the fields and the people and fills them with her form: her name and her body. No longer is there a silence between her name and her body, a pause between her singing and the audible echoes. The true weaving and mingling of threads of experience take place, so that vertical and horizontal structures merge. The static tower blends with the moving, horizontal boat. When the Lady is in the boat that moves through the gaps between the fields, she closes the spaces, as her voice and her body spill over into the landscape, and, in turn, that landscape bends to meet her. Her white robe "loosely" flies "to left and right" and the leaves from the willows lining the bank fall lightly upon that robe. The sky reaches the earth; the inside, the outside; and together they eradicate the "as if" of the previous separateness. This separateness, dependent upon gaps, makes everything into an "as if"; but in Part IV there is rarely a gap between the image and its context. Tennyson relies little on simile. In fact, in revising the 1832 version of the poem he chooses to rid the lines of similes. The Lady herself becomes a metaphor. She is not "like" a brilliant meteor but is "A gleaming shape." With her "glassy countenance" she becomes both mirror, seer, and object.

As in the metaphoric landscape described above there is a yoking, a *glissement*, rather than an interrupting. Now it is the Lady who catches the others' gaze. It is she, not Lancelot, whom the people view and through whom they recognize the limitations of their own vision. When the citizens of Camelot regard her, understandably they are fearful because they fear to see a reflection of their own lack and emptiness. Although her name appears upon her boat, and her body is as an image, her coming tells of a world which does not have to depend upon image and name. As their questions reveal, the citizens are dependent upon such tangible tokens and are trapped, as the Lady once was, in a landscape of successive, unconnected images framed by "who" and "what." Theirs is not a place to admit transcendence or a unifying vision. The Lady's, however, is: Edgar F. Shannon, Jr., is correct—the Lady has moved to "insight." But that insight does not have to be regarded in a Christian mystical context, for her movement is not necessarily to a vision which exists beyond the image. Rather it is a journey to a pre-imagistic understanding which negates image and recaptures a condition that does not require representation. In her recovery of a pre-imagistic state, she participates in the metaphoric impulse, for, even though metaphor begins in the concrete and seems initially to depend upon the conjunction of representations, the tension between that yoking scatters the objects and discards them, and seems finally to strain to retrieve a knowledge which is not at all linked to representation. The metaphor seems to wish to forget image. It is, therefore, understandable that in the poem, all that remains for the citizens is that scattering—her dead body and her inscribed name.

When the Lady inserts herself into the spaces of the landscape and thereby acknowledges the possibility for continuity and similarity in experience, she also places herself within a context which recognizes differences and otherness. As metaphor teaches, similarity is impossible without difference. The Lady's act of writing her name is an important aspect of her involvement with metaphor. It is as if the name were an abbreviated metaphor. The written name brings with it hopes of continuity because it is a fixed designator; it also admits differences because the very act of naming acknowledges the presence of the Other and the necessity for that presence to break away from a metonymic relationship with her parent, the land of Shalott (she is, after all, the Lady of Shalott), and create her own identity.

In the early parts of the poem, the Lady's name seems indefinite, some arbitrary identifier imposed on her by the reapers. She is neither conscious of her name nor desirous to use it. She has "little care." It is only when she leaves the tower that she cares. Then by taking on the name (baptising herself if you like) and inscribing it on the very vessel of her mediation into her surroundings, she goes to Camelot. (It is interesting to note that when Tennyson revised the 1832 version of the poem, he moved the name forward from the stern of the boat to the prow.) This inscribed name, the mediator, becomes a mirror through which she can see and present herself as being distinct from others and allow them to discover how they in their imagistic-dependent world are different from her. It also becomes a means by which she, as Tennyson did on occasion when he would repeat his name to reach a higher plane, can separate herself from a world ironically enslaved to naming objects.

However, because she does write her name, death and wounding are also inevitable. On the one hand she escapes the limits of metonymy, but on the other hand she faces the experience of loss, for naming is also a form of mourning, like the mournful carol she sings at the end. To name is to experience closure. It is as Claude Lévi-Strauss writes, "as far as one can go." Naming involves death also because it aspires to the ultimate, to fix the margin. However, in attempting to fix the margin the name grows more conscious of the absence of the ultimate, that is of the difference between the fixed reference and the idea. As Walter Benjamin suggests, names are the incomplete and inadequate mirrors of meaning. They are the fact of knowledge; not knowledge itself. Names name the death of oneness and are dependent upon representation.

Because there is a sense of loss accompanying naming, when the Lady of Shalott asserts her name into the consciousness of Camelot, she wounds and ruptures the synecdochic order of the dull-witted society and exposes its emptiness. When the citizens gaze at her name, they feel an absence to which their only responses are questions tying them more tightly to their dependency upon representation and pulling them further away from the presence of the Lady's metaphoric vision, a vision which could heal the wounding of their consciousness by her name. There is not a place from which they can travel beyond the rupturing of consciousness into the salvation of metaphor.

The citizens on shore cannot participate in the Lady's metaphoric world; consequently, they also cannot go where metaphor leads and follow her into the final stage of her journey—her death and the death of metaphor. Just as she reaches "The first house by the water-side," her blood freezes, her eyes darken "wholly," and her singing ends. With her death and the coming of darkness and silence, she moves into a realm where the elements—light, time, space, and place—which form and bind words, sounds, and images are neither present nor absent. Perhaps beyond the audible reverberations of the poem, her death takes her where metaphor reaches and reclaims what metaphor paradoxically aspires to grasp, but cannot: a state not linked to representation—hence, a state previous to itself, an accomplishment which ironically causes the death of metaphor by foreclosing its characteristic impulse which is a desire to undo itself as well as others' desire for it.

In the end, then, the Lady is relieved of the burden of the metaphoric impulse to reach for what it cannot grasp, a burden which stares back at those left on shore. While the citizens stand gaping, struggling with their limitations and their dependency upon image and name, she enters a nameless, imageless realm which exists prior to the assumption of metaphor, name or the "symbolic." But now that there is a glimmer, a suggestion, of that realm, her presence for others is more than the challenge of her metaphoric vision; it is also a reminder of the pre-symbolic, raw state which because of its very nature resists and irritates metaphor and increases its burden. Her death, therefore, offers a strange reversal, for it reveals vividly the limitations of the representational world, even those of that world's most integrative act—the metaphor—an act which when well done undoes itself. Her death frustrates whatever impulses there might have been for others to leave the metonymic space behind, recover and participate in the metaphoric, and, thereby, heal their wounded consciousness.

The Lady's journey to a metaphoric landscape and her release from that burden is important in itself, but it also needs to be reconsidered briefly in terms of the reader's movement through the poem. When the reader first encounters the poem he is separated from it, imprisoned in his own tower into which flash words, phrases, sounds, rhythms, and rhymes. These succeed each other as he moves from line to line—forgetting, losing, and replacing. He waits for some word, some rhythm, some figure of sound to catch and hold him and remind him, like the picture of eternal reverence on Lancelot's shield, that there is something which unites the spaces between images and words. Eventually the reader inserts himself into these spaces and, like the Lady of Shalott, becomes more aware of both the differences and similarities working with and against each other. Once he has entered the metaphoric relationship with the poem, the reader's impulse is to sustain that relationship and find salvation in its integrating act. But this impulse involves bearing the burden and treachery of metaphor.

If in becoming the agent for metaphor, the reader attempts not only to integrate one image, space, and word with others and create some sense of wholeness, but also to follow the desire of the metaphor to reach a pre-imagistic or pre-symbolic state, the reader courts his own undoing and discomfort, and faces his own duplicity. The reader tempts disaster, for at the moment of integration when there appears to be an understanding of the text, a feeling of reaching the "truth," the metaphor pushes on. Momentarily it goes where its impulses take it and bursts open to expose a prior, raw, non-representational "truth." That revelation (the death of the metaphor) destroys the promise of salvation which the reader thought he had found in metaphor. Now he is caught between image and non-image, between the symbolic and the raw, in a space between areas for which there is no integrating act. No longer can he rest; he has been trapped by the very act which supported him. In the end, he stands between the citizens and the Lady, belonging to neither world. Frustrated, the reader joins Lancelot and, perhaps, Tennyson on the wharf. Together poet and reader momentarily resemble and anticipate the doubters in "The Ancient Sage" (1885) who, in metonymic time measured by "Thens" and "Whens," "creep from thought to thought." They stand powerless to follow the metaphoric impulse and pass into the "Nameless" and leave images, names, and words, the "shadows of a shadow-world," behind. They cannot die with the Lady. Neither can they be the ancient sage who, when he sits alone, "revolving in" himself, finds:

The mortal limit of the Self was loosed,
And past into the Nameless, as a cloud
Melts into Heaven.

"The Lady of Shalott" is a poem that acknowledges the poet's and the reader's dilemma. It is as if Tennyson were attempting to use the poem as a vessel to rescue himself and his reader from an enclosed and image-bound landscape and move into a recognition of the non-representational. But, as much as he repeats the Lady's name, allows the sounds of the refrain to resound, and, in the manner of the ancient sage, lets the poem revolve in itself, he cannot push the poem into a "Nameless" state. The poem, like the Lady's boat, remains to stare back and remind Tennyson and the reader of their bondage to "mortal limits"— rhyme and words. Like the swallow on the lake "That sees and stirs the surface-shadow there," the most that the poem, Tennyson, and the reader can do is dip "into the abyss" beneath the rhyming shadow world.

It is difficult to refrain from reconsidering Tennyson's conclusion from the point of view of a later poet who entered the same lists, but attempted to achieve another outcome. In "Sunday Morning" [Wallace Stevens](#) acknowledges our dependency on detail (the "old dependency of day and night"), yet suggests that it is those very fleeting particulars which consummate our "dreams" and "desires." As for death, it is in fact death itself that engenders meaning ("Death is the mother of beauty,"). If Stevens is right, the poet and reader do not in the end have to fear "the immense disorder of truths" ("Connoisseur of Chaos"), but can stand beside that "pensive man" who is the "connoisseur of Chaos," and see "that eagle float / For which the intricate Alps are a single nest."

Source: Ann C. Colley, "The Quest for the 'Nameless' in Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott,'" in *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 23, No. 3, Autumn 1985, pp. 369-78.

The Lady of Shalott: Compare and Contrast

- **1842:** An important source of entertainment is books and magazines. More middle-class people are familiar with the mythic stories as they have been preserved in literature for generations.

Today: There is still some familiarity with King Arthur's Court, but most people know it as it is depicted in movies or in theme park recreations.

- **1842:** The English countryside is more open and unpolluted. Cities, particularly London, are crowded and polluted, but people who have been to the country can easily imagine the landscape that Tennyson describes.

Today: For the most part, the English countryside is divided into walled-off fields and farm tracks. Since coal burning is illegal in cities, urban air pollution is reduced.

- **1842:** Alfred Tennyson was a young, struggling poet who had to quit writing for a time because he could not pay his bills.

Today: Alfred, Lord Tennyson, is considered an important writer and his works are studied in English literature courses.

- **1842:** Scientists do not understand microbiological causes for death, which makes it more mysterious; thus, poets explore rich metaphorical possibilities for explaining what causes sudden death.

Today: Microbiology explains many symptoms to be caused by viruses and fungi, and science measures correlations between physical health and longevity and psychological and emotional well-being.

The Lady of Shalott: Topics for Further Study

- Read about the presidential administration of John F. Kennedy. Why was it called "Camelot"? Find particular figures from the Arthurian myths that correspond to figures in U.S. politics. In particular, who would you say is most like the Lady of Shalott?
- The Lady of Shalott could only look at the world through a mirror, but mirrors were quite different in Tennyson's time than they are now. Research the history of how mirrors are made and explain how that would affect what she saw.
- Write a poem or a short story that explains how the Lady of Shalott came to have this curse put on her.
- This poem has been put to music several times. Adapt it to your favorite type of music, cutting out parts that you think are unnecessary. Explain your choices.
- The Lady of Shalott weaves a picture of what she sees outside her window. Research tapestries from the [Middle Ages](#) and report on what kinds of images they present and what kinds of stories they tell.
- Assume that the Lady of Shalott is not under a curse at all, that she cannot go outside because of psychological inhibitions. Report on what treatments are currently available for someone in her situation.

The Lady of Shalott: Media Adaptations

- A 1995 videocassette entitled *"The Lady of Shalott": A Poem and Its Readers* is available from Films for the Humanities & Sciences. It features a reading of the poem and responses by a variety of interested people.
- Encyclopedia Britannica Films produced a 16 mm. film in 1970 called *The Lady of Shalott*, with Cecil Bellamy reading the poem, plus a variety of music and visuals related to it.
- "The Lady of Shalott" is included on a Caedmon recording of *The Poetry of Tennyson*, read by Dame Sybil Thorndike and Sir Lewis Casson. It was recorded in 1972 and is also available on audiocassette.
- A four-album set released by Allyn & Bacon in 1955, *Master Recordings in English Literature*, includes this poem. V. C. Clinton-Baddeley reads.
- A two-album set, *Narrative Poetry*, part of the *London Library of Recorded English* series, includes this poem. It was released by Columbia in 1980, with selections read by Cecil Truncer, Julian Randall, John Laurie, and V. C. Clinton-Baddeley.
- The second entry in the Argo series, *The English Poets from Chaucer to Yeats*, is devoted to Tennyson. This recording, [Alfred, Lord Tennyson](#), made in association with the British Council and Oxford University Press, includes selections from Tennyson read by Frank Duncan, Michael Horndurn, and David King.
- "The Lady of Shalott" is depicted in a fantasy painting by John William Waterhouse in 1875. The painting became commercially available as a poster from Shorewood Fine Arts Reproductions in 1999.

The Lady of Shalott: What Do I Read Next?

- Edgar Allan Poe's poem "Annabel Lee" deals with the sudden death of a woman the speaker has loved, "many many years ago, in a kingdom by the sea." Poe's poetic music matches Tennyson's. Originally published in 1845, it is available in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, published by Vintage Books in 1995.
- Sir Thomas Malory's version of the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, titled *Le Morte D'Arthur*, was published in 1485 by William Caxton and is still one of the most influential sources used today for information about the myth. It is available in an unabridged edition, a reprint of the Caxton original, from Sterling Publications, copyright 2000.
- John Steinbeck, the twentieth-century author who is best known for his realistic novels such as [Of Mice and Men](#) and [The Grapes of Wrath](#), wrote one of the best updated versions of the Arthurian legend in his *Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*, available from Noonday Press, 1993.
- Tennyson included a poem entitled "Lancelot and Elaine," which stays truer to the traditional legends about the relationship between the Round Table knight and Elaine of Astolat, in his book [Idylls of the King](#), which is all about the legends associated with King Arthur. Portions of the book were published between 1859 and 1885, when the first complete edition appeared.
- Patricia A. McKillip's novel [The Tower at Stony Wood](#), published in 2000 by Berkley/Ace, is based on the story of "The Lady of Shalott." The imagery gives a strong sense of the world that Tennyson discusses in this poem, although much of the story is different.
- Readers can see how a nineteenth-century U.S. writer imagined coping with being among the knights of the Round Table in Mark Twain's satiric novel [A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court](#), his response to reading Malory's version of the legends. Originally published in 1889, this novel is available from Bantam Classics in a 1994 edition.
- Nineteenth-century poet and novelist, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, covers the subject of this poem several times, most notably in her poem "Elaine and Elaine," written in 1885 and published in the 1891 collection *Songs of the Silent World*, which is still available through some library systems.

The Lady of Shalott: Bibliography and Further Reading

Sources

Jump, John D. *Tennyson: "In Memoriam," "Maud," and Other Poems*. J. A. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1974, pp. vii—xx.

Noyes, Arthur. "Tennyson and Some Recent Critics," in *Some Aspects of Modern Poetry*. Hodder & Stoughton., 1924, pp. 133-76.

Saintsbury, George. "Tennyson," in *Corrected Impressions: Essays on Victorian Writers*. Dodd Mead & Company, pp. 21-30.

Shaw, W. David. "Rites of Passage: 'The Lady of Shalott' and 'The Lotus-Eaters,'" in *Tennyson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Elizabeth A. Francis. Prentice-Hall, 1980, pp. 19-27.

Whitman, Walt. "A Word about Tennyson," in *Critic* (New York), Vol. 10, January 1887, pp. 1-2.

Further Reading

Amis, Kingsley. Introduction to *Tennyson*. Penguin Books, 1973, pp. 7-19. Students who find scholarly work hard to follow will appreciate Amis's brief examination of Tennyson's life and importance. Amis, who could be one of the funniest novelists of the twentieth century, seems an unlikely choice for introducing Tennyson's poetry, but his essay is reverent and warm.

Buckley, Jerome Hamilton. *Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet*. Harvard University Press, 1960. Part biography and part criticism, this book gives some insight into Tennyson's psychological state as he wrote this poem.

Foakes, R. A. "The Commitment to Metaphor: Modern Criticism and Romantic [Poetry](#)," in *British Romantic Poets: Recent Revelations*. New York University Press, 1966, pp. 22-32. Foakes does not specifically talk about Tennyson, but he does talk about how [Romanticism](#) affected poetry that came after it. Readers can draw conclusions about where Tennyson fits into the scheme Foakes proposes.

Hollander, John. "Tennyson's Melody," in *Alfred Lord Tennyson*, edited by Harold Bloom. Chelsea House Publishers, 1985, pp. 103-26. Hollander's examination of the sound of Tennyson's poems, including "The Lady of Shalott," is rich and full of details.