The Lady of Shalott: (1832 ) pp: 67-73

Summary

Part 1

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.
Part 2

Lines 37-45 The Lady seems to be happy where she is: her songs echo "cheerily" (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 The Lady of Shalott: Summary 6 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.

Part 3

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. The Lady of Shalott: Summary 7 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.

Part 4

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 The Lady of Shalott: Summary 8 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.
Most critics approach the poem as expressing the tension between art and life. It raises the question of whether or not artistic seclusion is necessary for achievements. In the beginning of the poem, despite her isolation, the lady of Shalott experiences artistic fulfilment and accomplishment in her safe haven of Shalott. She works on her web and sings her song, blissful and happy. However, her art is doubly removed; it mimics the shadows glimpsed through a mirror and is far from direct observation of real life. This isolation finally prompts her to a gesture of passion and thus an embrace of her own death. The mirror cracks, symbolizing the end of her artistic abilities. Harold Bloom concludes that “the end of artistic isolation leads to the death of creativity. The artist’s intense loneliness is absolutely necessary, for all great art demands solitude and silent reflection.”

Some critics suggested that the poem is a representation of how Tennyson viewed society; the distance at which other people are in the lady’s eyes is symbolic of the distance he feels from society. The fact that she sees them only reflected through a mirror signifies the way in which Shalott and Tennyson see the world in a filtered sense. This distance is therefore linked to the artistic licence Tennyson often wrote about.

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 aaaaabcccb. 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*.

**The Lady of Shalott: Style** 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.

**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