Tennyson's Lady of Shalott

For ere she reached upon the tide the first house by the waterside, singing in her song she died, The Lady of Shalott

"The Lady of Shalott" by Arthur Hughes. 1873.
**Biography**

Alfred Tennyson was born on August 6th, 1809 in Somersby, Lincolnshire, although one source states he was born the same day in December, and another on the 5th of August. His parents were George Clayton Tennyson, the town rector (and an alcoholic), and Elizabeth Fytche, who loved reading to her children. Alfred was the fourth of 12 children, and as a child would often tell stories to his younger siblings about battles and the brave knights who fought in them. One of the books he read as a child was *The Old Manor House* by Charlotte Smith (written in 1793). That book centers on a secret love and a secluded maiden, bearing some similarities with “The Lady of Shalott.” Before the age of 16, Tennyson had written a 6000 line epic entitled “Armageddon,” and a drama called “The Devil and the Lady,” in which a man named Magus is leaving on a journey but concerned for his wife convinces the Devil to protect her virtue. Perhaps that is how the curse came upon the Lady of Shalott.

Tennyson began attending Trinity College in Cambridge in 1827, the same year that he and his brother Charles published their first book of poems aptly named “Poems by Two Brothers.” At Cambridge, he met Arthur Hallam who became one of his dearest friends, even naming his first son after him. In 1830 he published his own collection of poems entitled “Poems Chiefly Lyrical.” Some of his more famous poems such as “Claribel” and “Mariana” were in this particular collection.

In 1833, Tennyson published his second book of poetry, which contained “The Lady of Shalott.” Due to the book’s poor reception, he stopped writing for nearly ten years. In 1842, he finally published two more books, one containing works that had previously been published, and another of almost entirely new poems. Contained in these books were “The Lady of Shalott,” (again) and “Morte d'Arthur” (another poem centered in Arthurian legend).

Many things happened to Tennyson in 1850: he published “In Memoriam A.H.H.” inspired by and dedicated to Arthur Hallam who died in 1833, he was named Poet Laureate, and he married to Emily Sellwood. He had two sons with her, Hallam and Lionel. As Poet Laureate, Tennyson wrote the expected poems, none quite so famous as “Charge of the Light Brigade” written in 1855, commemorating an infamous incident in the Crimean War. Between the years 1856 and 1885, he began publishing a series of 12 poems entitled “Idylls of the King,” detailing the rise and fall of King Arthur and Camelot.

Queen Victoria, a devoted fan of his work, created Tennyson a Baron in 1884. After his death on October 6th, 1892, his son Hallam succeeded him as a baron; Alfred Austin succeeded Tennyson as Poet Laureate.
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<td><strong>Scholarly Resources</strong> (The link directs to the page for the full text can be found and also gives a nice, brief description on what the article covers. Some of these may only be accessible to those with a valid HawkID. Because of this, after the link, I've put the information on where the article can be found for those interested in finding it):</td>
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<td>- Tennyson's Lady of Shalott and Pre-Raphaelite Renderings: Statement and Counter Statement. (Religion &amp; the Arts; Sep2002, Vol. 6 Issue 3, p231-256) Great source for discovering more information and criticism surrounding the paintings about the poem.</td>
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<td>- A Reflection on Fiction and Art in &quot;The Lady of Shalott&quot; (Victorian Poetry; Summer2003, Vol. 41 Issue 2)</td>
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<td>- Getting It Wrong in &quot;The Lady of Shalott&quot; (Victorian Poetry; Spring2009, Vol. 47 Issue 1) Excellent article about the &quot;imprisoned artist&quot;, which is what the author argues the Lady becomes during the poem.</td>
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"If I Die Young" by The Band Perry. (C) 2010 Republic Nashville Records, a division of UMG Recordings, Inc. From The Band Perry's YoutubeVEVO page.

Possibly a modern interpretation of the poem? Notice how the band weaves their way through the pastoral setting towards the river. The singer also happens to be holding a book of Tennyson poetry as she takes her position as the Lady of Shalott in the boat. At the end of the video, the book is opened to the eponymous poem.

**Discussion Question:** How do these modern interpretations of "The Lady of Shalott" push the poem in new directions? Or do they? What liberties are taken with the artists who have used the poem as their source of inspiration?

"The Lady of Shalott" by Loreena McKennitt. Juno Awards. Uploaded by DrizztDeUrden

Tennyson's poem put to music by artist Loreena McKennitt.

While not directly related to "The Lady of Shalott", this page features a wax recording of Tennyson himself reading another famous piece, "The Charge of the Light Brigade". Offers some nice perspective on the author himself, and his tone.

**For Further Reading**

*Idylls of the King*

Written by Tennyson between the years 1856 and 1885, *Idylls* delves even further into Arthurian myth.

Hamlet by William Shakespeare. Although it has much more going on in it, it does have parallel themes, especially in regard to the similarities between Ophelia and The Lady. Worth reading just to compare the star-crossed women.
**Introduction**

**Synopsis**

Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” is a poem that describes the imprisonment of an anonymous young woman. She dwells in a tower on the island named Shalott, next to King Arthur’s Camelot. A curse, laid upon her for unknown reason, prevents her from leaving the tower lest she bear the consequences of death. There on the island of Shalott she spends her time weaving cloth together and watching below the people passing by from Camelot. In time she becomes rather envious of their freedom, wanting a life that is governed by her own free will. It is the passing by of Sir Lancelot one day that she decides she has ultimately grown tired of living a life of solitude in the shadows; she soon after brings herself to the banks of the river by Shalott. There she boards a fishing boat to travel to Camelot, knowing she will meet her death before she arrives. As she sails down the river, the people of Camelot hear her singing her death-song and become intrigued by the beautiful sounds. They follow her voice only to come upon her body lying in the boat, lifeless and lying on top of a weaved blanket. The young woman met her end here, breaking the curse and furthering the legend of what is known as the Lady of Shalott.

Over the years, the Lady has become somewhat of an enigma. Possibly based on the legend of Elaine of Astolat, nobody knows Tennyson’s true inspiration for the poem. It’s significance, however, is great. The Lady of Shalott has taken her own place history next to the Ophelia’s and Guinevere’s.

**Themes:**

- **Predestination vs. freewill:** The concept of fate versus freewill brings up the idea of prophecy. If Lady of Shalott was doomed to kill herself, then suicide is considered an act of free will. This reinforces the idea of her trading her imprisonment in the tower for her death- or perhaps what she saw as her freedom. However if she believed in a type of prophecy and sensed her death was coming no matter what, then her dying after leaving the tower is only relevant through correlation, not causation. Thus in this case she did not commit suicide by going to the river but instead was drawn to and inspired by the town before she took her final breaths. However, it is important neither side can be proved due to the ambiguity of the poem. Interpretation is, after all, in the eye of the beholder.
The theme of the imprisoned artist is central to this poem. It can be seen as significant because although it is unclear to the reader if Lady of Shalott chose to constantly reside in the tower, she still produces art nonetheless. However, even though she has a talent for weaving cloth together, she is alone and bears a curse that prevents her from ever leaving the tower. She lives a life of solitude and does not communicate with the outside world except with her song she sings across the land. The fact that she is alone but that her voice is heard throughout Camelot reinforces the individuality she is forced to experience; she is apart of the town since they can hear her, but none will approach her. As a weaver of the blankets she is considered a creator and must be separate from the art; she only has her voice to prove her existence so like the weaver, she is among the group but is truly alone and different. Her weaving skills better while her mental health declines; she can be seen as finally being able to fulfill her desire for freedom (either through suicide or timed prophecy) and let herself loose from her curse and from her life as weaver. She rows down the river to Camelot and meets her end, her final song drawing and mesmerizing the town inhabitants.

Circularity: A recurring theme throughout the poem, and one of the strongest, is the sense of circularity or cyclical it creates. Even in the structure of the stanzas Tennyson draws attention to the repetitive nature of both the Lady and the poem. The 5th and 9th line of each stanza nearly always ends in “Shalott” or “Camelot.” It is not until the Lady finally chooses to break out of her web, does it change, and we get the a reference to “Lancelot”. The theme of circularity is portrayed best visually in William Holman Hunt's painting of the Lady. Hunt uses numerous circles throughout the work, and uses historical figures as a narrative device to show the paradoxical methods of the Lady: While she moves forward and continues weaving the stories of new heroes, she is never capable of escaping herself.

As well as many other minor themes, including: perspective, courtly love, nature, etc.

The Two versions:

Tennyson completed two versions of the poem “The Lady of Shalott”. The first in 1833, and a revised version that was completed nine years later in 1842. As a group, we analyzed both versions of the poem to see why Tennyson may have changed certain elements and what the results of those changes mean to the poem as a whole. The following is our analysis for each part of the poem.

Part 1:

The first stanza on both versions opens with an introduction to the city of Camelot and the island of Shalott that dwells nearby. It states the layout of the land between the cities by describing the “…fields of barley and of rye/ That clothe the [land] and meet the sky.” In the 1833 and 1842 versions of Lady of Shalott it is important to keep in mind the different rhetoric used between the two pieces. Within the last four lines of the first stanza, there is an immediate difference in the imagery. While the 1842 version describes more of Camelot’s view of Shalott (“And up and down the people go,/ gazing where the lilies willow veiled/) the 1833 version primarily channels a more natural view of Shalott: (“_The yellowleaved waterlily, /The greensheathed daffodilly./Tremble in the water chillly./Round about Shalott._”) While both versions introduce the island, the 1833 version allows the reader to have a more hands-on experience; the reader is not concerned with what Camelot can see but rather is concerned with the overall description of the setting. This allows the reader more room for self-interpretation, thus creating a more personal experience.

The second stanza among both the 1833 and 1842 version go on to describe the land and layout of trees between the two locations, with the 1833 version appealing more to the aesthetics of the setting. In the version of 1833 the second line states (“_The sunbeam-showers break and quiver/In the stream that runneth ever_”) which points to Shalott being a place that is more welcoming as opposed to the 1842 version (“_Little breezes dusk and shiver,/Through the wave that runs for ever._”) The description of a “sunbeam-shower” as opposed to a “breeze shivering” initially makes Shalott seem a more pleasing place to be, however both versions go on to describe the beautiful flowery setting of the island. The last lines inform the reader about the tower the island of Shalott contains, or rather what is to be known as the home of a young woman called The Lady of Shalott.

The third stanza between the 1833 and 1842 versions is drastically different, and once again brings into play how and by who the island of Shalott is interpreted. The 1833 version begins with a reaper in the fields who hears the Lady of Shalott (“chanting cheery./Like an angel singing clearly”); the Lady is not seen but only heard which brings an element of mystery to the poem. To further the idea of a mysterious inhabitant of the island of Shalott, the last lines state: (“_Beneath the moon, the reaper weary/Listening whispers, ‘tis the fairy/Lady of Shalott:_)” Since she is not revealed to the reader’s eyes yet, her beauty and presence remain elusive. In this stanza her voice rings clear, suggesting to the reader she will make her first appearance soon.

The 1842 version once again brings the reader to the view of Shalott through the eyes of Camelot. The river and road that winds between the two locations is described here, (“_willow veiled/Slide the heavy barges trailed/By slow horses;_”) The path next to the river is constructed by Camelot, as are the boats that are found in the river. As opposed to the 1833 references to only Lady’s voice, the 1842 version asks, (“But who hath seen her wave her hand?/Or at the casement seen her stand?”) This version gives the reader a more solid image of a person rather than just the voice. This makes the 1842 version more explicit in its lines and introduces first the appearance of Lady of Shalott before mentioning the song she sings.
In the 1833 version the fourth stanza goes on to describe the borders of the island “with a rose-fence,” as well as finally introduces the Lady of Shalott. The last lines of the fourth stanza state: (“A peargarland winds her head; She leaneth on a velvet bed. Fully royally apparelèd”), which gives the reader a lovely mental picture of who the Lady of Shalott is. Since this stanza focuses more on the individuality of Lady of Shalott, it is clear that she is now the main focus of the poem. In the 1842 version of the fourth stanza the reapers are now mentioned as they were earlier in the 1833 version. Since in the 1842 version Lady of Shalott has already made an appearance, her song that echoes through the land is now mentioned. The reapers are also described as hearing her music. She is still an element of mystery through both versions by the end of part one, however the reader now has a better understanding of who the main character is.

Part 2:

The third and fourth stanzas remain identical in the two versions of the poem, with the exceptions of a few changes in punctuation. Words like “tower’d” are now “thro’” and now “towered” and “through”. A relatively simple change, it is most likely to remove some stress from certain words and let the poem flow more smoothly.

Perhaps the most important difference in the second part of the poem is the change in the first stanza. “N o time hath she to sport and play;/A charmed web she weaves always” is changed to the more ambiguous and possibly more pleasant: “There she weaves by night and day; A magic web with colours gay.” Tennyson specifically tells the reader of her lack of time in the first version, indicating that the Lady is a true prisoner. In the revised version, however, ambiguity is added. While it still appears she is a prisoner to the curse, he adds doubt, and in doing so adds richness and complexity.

The biggest change is in the second stanza, which is almost unrecognizable between the two versions. The 1833 version seems more concerned with her wellbeing, and how “she lives with little joy or fear.” The revised version focuses more on what she is doing, “And moving through a mirror clear/That hangs before her all the year./Shadows of the world appear.” Again Tennyson adds ambiguity. In the revised version it is more of a narrative; he gives the reader the setting and allows the reader to deduce what will become of the Lady. In the first version, he is much more blunt, leaving little ambiguity and therefore little room for an actual narrative to occur.

Part 3:

Between the 1833 and 1842 versions, Tennyson did not change very much in the third section of Lady of Shalott. He did change the direction Sir Lancelot was moving in relation to Camelot, by making “from’s” become “to’s.” In doing so, Tennyson makes the Lady chase Lancelot back to Camelot. But since Lancelot is going by horse and has a head start, he arrives long before her boat, thus making him available to look down on her lovely face wen she does arrive.

Tennyson also replaced the word “green” with “still” when describing Shalott. This gives Shalott a more ethereal feel, which adds to the poem’s overall mystery. The only other changes were likely made to adjust the flow of the poem and the emphasis on certain syllables; those changes were replacing the second “tirra, lirra” with “by the river” and “flower” with “lily.”

Part 4:

Probably the most extensively revised of the four parts, part four not only has marked changes in each stanza, but the second and fourth stanza’s from the 1833 version were merged into, and the ending stanza is all but entirely new.

The first stanza, which is the least revised of part four, only has changes in word choice, skillfully keeping a certain ambiguity but altering the language to compliment the narrative aspect of the language so it sounds less like a simple recanting of facts. The third stanza in the 1833 version becomes the second in the 1842 version. Though more thoroughly revised than the first stanza the aim of the revision seems to be the same. Redundancies are eliminated such as describing the look of the lady of Shalott more than once. “With a steady stony glance—/Like some bold seer in a trance,/ Beholding all his own mischance,” changes to “And down the river's dim expanse,/Like some bold seer in a trance/Seeing all his own mischance,” As well as continuing to help the narrative tone. Eg. “it was the closing of the day.” Becomes “At the closing of the day”

The third stanza of the 1842 version is stanzas two and four of the 1833 version combined, the first half and the second half respectively. Here the narrative aesthetic is being embellished in the 1842 version by replacing the sinister “chanting her deathsong” to “singing her last song” and the silence is replaced by rustling leaves and “night sounds.” Consolidating these two stanzas also does a wonder for the narrative in that instead of describing the lady of Shalott and the surroundings in separate stanza’s they are described together this give a certain unity to the scene described by the poem which is disrupted in the first, as well as providing a more noticeable contrast between the lady of Shalott and her surroundings.

The fourth stanza is also only slightly revised, rather than having her face being the signifier or her death and turning toward Camelot, it is her eyes. The fifth stanza has a similar alteration to the third and fourth describing her as “a gleaming shape” rather than “A pale, pale corpse” in the first half, and in the second half the structure is re-arranged to help the flow.
The final stanza is where all the subtle alterations from the lady of Shallot and her surroundings being sinister and foreboding to magical and implicit have a real impact. The dead lady’s arrival in the 1833 version is congruent with the melancholy tone of the entire piece, however in the 1842 version there is a sense of disruption of a jovial atmosphere upon the lady’s arrival. This interruption which is in the first half of the stanza concludes the narrative well providing an appropriate transition to a far more ambiguous ending than in the 1833 version. Though still shrouded in riddle the direct statement from the lady is still less ambiguous and prone to elicit interpretation than Lancelot’s contextless musing. This points the reader to the bulk of the poem to search for an interpretation instead of providing the easy, albeit vague, word straight from the horse’s mouth to try and parse a meaning out of.

Discussion Question:

1. How does the change in language in the revised version of the poem make clearer(or more confusing) the themes discussed in the poem? Does it add more richness? Which version of the poem contains a better “narrative” within?

2. How does the difference in language between the two versions change the interpretation of who Lady of Shalott is? Does a change in language give us a different interpretation of who she is?

3. Through analysis of the two poems, what kind of effect was Lord Tennyson hoping for when he wrote a second version nine years later?

4. What are important elements to consider when analyzing Lady Shalott’s choice to break the curse and why?

5. Why is the conclusion of the poem changed from the Lady of Shalott addressing the crowd to, Lancelot addressing her? How does this affect the conclusion of the poem?

Armchair Analysis-Form is Content

One of the most fascinating aspects about “The Lady of Shalott” is the numerous visual artworks that serve as companions to the poem. The following are four of the most famous visual interpretations, three by John William Waterhouse and one by William Holman Hunt, along with our analysis of each painting.
"I am half-sick of shadows," Said the Lady Of Shalott by John William Waterhouse. 1915

This painting is surely as mysterious as the poem itself. Not only does the figure itself suggest opposing things, but the setting does as well. The Lady of Shallot is dressed in vibrant colour and has a healthy pallor however despite this, and her relaxed pose, her eyes are shadowed and her brow is very slightly furrowed. Upon first glance the setting seems very common place and almost pleasant. There are no mystical or fairytale aspects about it however the circular mirror which appears like a window give a false impression of openness. Upon further study the false openness highlights the darker aspects of the picture, such as her dark sockets and shadowy interior of the room. The contradictory aspects along with the title could suggest madness, noting that in her seemingly reposing stance she is clutching her head.
This painting is clearly a representation of the final stanza in the third section of the poem. The Lady is leaving her loom and taking her three paces to the window. This will give her a better look at Sir Lancelot, who can be seen in the cracked mirror behind her. She has not yet broke free from her web, nor has she realized that the curse has come upon her. Had she realized this, her face would appear more sorrowful or resentful, as opposed to inquisitive and a little apprehensive. The thread wrapped around her legs could be seen as a metaphor for her freedom, in that although she may get up and peer out the window, she is still bound for all eternity, either in the tower or in death. It is also interesting to note that the only colors besides white, black, brown, gray, and the gold on her dress are on the finished weavings, the seat of her chair, and in the mirror. It would seem that Waterhouse is trying to say that as far as she knows, real life is dull and colorless: only shadows and magical sights have any sort of color. The red on the chair seemingly alludes to the curse, saying that if she wants color, she should stay in the tower.
"The Lady of Shalott" by John William Waterhouse. 1888.

The importance of this painting is seen in the facial expression of Lady of Shalott. Although she is sailing towards her freedom, she shows us an expression of utter devastation; she is also sailing to her death. It is crucial to keep in mind that the only option of Lady of Shalott achieving her freedom is for her to break the curse, whereby her departure from the tower soon follows. Since the only way to break the curse is to offer herself into the hands of death, then this is seen as a pitchfork in the road in which either route can be seen as undesirable. She is alive if she lives in the tower, however she does not feel she is really living if she is a prisoner of the curse. Since she left the tower, she feels the end of the curse is near, but this does not mean she will now live freely. Instead she exchanges her imprisonment of the curse for her death, because the quality of living is only best when paired with genuine freedom. Ultimately it is unclear whether she commits suicide by leaving her weaving and her life of solitude in the tower, or if she was following an inevitable fate in which she understands and accepts her death is near regardless of physical location.
The first thing that jumps out about Hunt’s painting compared to those of Waterhouse and Hughes is the color. The painting is so vibrant that every shape and detail jumps off the canvas and the most important shapes throughout the painting become clear: the circles. The work is filled with numerous cyclical shapes, which is a clear reference to the cyclical nature of the poem. The Lady is doomed to repeat her process forever. An even more intriguing aspect of the painting is the background. There is a partially completed triptych, which appears to display Hercules and the Golden Apples and the birth of Jesus (both finished), and the unfinished portion of Lancelot, which she seems to be working on at the present. With this knowledge it becomes clear that the Lady is a prisoner of History! She is doomed to weave the tales of the heroes around her. The painting, like the revised version of the poem, has a much stronger sense of narrative. It is much easier to see both time and space compared to the Waterhouse paintings. Finally, is Hunt’s interpretation of the Lady in the tower: he takes Tennyson literally. “But in her web she still delights/To weave the mirror’s magic sights” physically placing the Lady in her loom. When Tennyson tells the reader “She left the web, she left the loom./She made three paces through the room” Hunt this time leaves it ambiguous. We do not know if the Lady will spring forth from her web, escaping her prison. Instead it is up for the viewer to finish her narrative.
This page was made in the Fall of 2011 by Michael Steffen, Karen Lamer, Laura Weber, and Ian Smith.