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The Lady of Shalott

Alfred, Lord Tennyson · *1832 (revised 1842) · original English text*

A woman weaves in a tower on an island near Camelot, watching the world only in a mirror, under a curse she does not understand. When Sir Lancelot rides by, she looks straight out of the window. Tennyson's poem is a ballad in four parts about art, longing, and the price of stepping into life.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What is the cost of seeing the world only at second hand, and what is the cost of choosing to look at it directly?

The Lady's weaving is steady and real work, but it is a copy of life made from reflections. Lancelot's passing makes the copy feel empty, and she turns to the real thing. The curse falls, the web flies out, and she dies as she floats down the river toward Camelot. Tennyson does not say whether she was wrong to look. He lets the reader feel both the loss and the daring.

KEY CHARACTERS

The Lady of Shalott
Weaver of the web, who sees the world only through a mirror and dies for one direct look.

Sir Lancelot
A knight of Arthur's court, who rides by and, without knowing it, ends her isolation.

the reapers
Farm workers who hear her singing and wonder about her but never see her.

the people of Camelot
Knights and citizens, who come to the river only when she is dead.

Grades 6–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
The Island and the River
PART I

The poem sets the scene: fields of barley and rye, a road to Camelot, and a lady nobody has seen who is heard singing from the tower.

- The river and the road are the two worlds: the Lady is on the island between them.
- The reapers hear her song but do not see her.
- The place is drawn as a landscape before it is a story.

02
The Weaving and the Curse
PART II

She weaves a magic web by watching a mirror, because a curse forbids her to look down to Camelot. She sees shadows of the world: market girls, a funeral, and lovers.

- The mirror holds only images of the road, never the road.
- The curse is stated as rumor: she does not know what it will be.
- She is a little tired of shadows; the poem says so quietly.

03
Sir Lancelot
PART III

Lancelot rides along the river in bright armor, singing. She leaves her loom, walks to the window, and looks at Camelot directly.

- The description of Lancelot is a blaze of color against the plain tower.
- Her choice is made in one movement, with no speech.
- The mirror cracks and the web floats out: the curse has come.

04
The Boat
PART IV

In a storm she finds a boat, writes her name on its prow, and floats toward Camelot, singing her last song.

- The change in weather matches the curse's fall.
- Her song grows slow as she is carried along.
- She dies before the boat reaches the quays.

05
Camelot's Verdict
PART IV, ENDING

The knights and ladies of Camelot gather and look at the dead woman in the boat. Lancelot reads her name and gives his one comment.

- The Lady is seen at last, but only when she cannot be answered.
- Lancelot's remark is courteous and distant: he does not know her.
- The poem leaves the moral for the reader to decide.

Art and Life · Longing · The Curse · The Window

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 6–12

1. The mirror is described in the first two parts. Ask what the Lady is able to know through it.
2. The poem's colors change when Lancelot arrives. Notice which words signal the change.
3. The refrain at the end of each stanza is a small place name. Notice what it keeps repeating.
4. Camelot's response is brief. Ask what the poem wants you to think of the people who looked too late.

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