

The Lady of Shallot

-Alfred Lord Tennyson

'The Lady of Shallot' is a Victorian ballet set in the age of King Arthur-one of many that Tennyson wrote. The poem revolves around Sir Lancelot and the Lady of Shallot who is condemned by a mysterious curse. Much of the poem's charm stems from its sense of mystery and elusiveness.

The poem that is divided into four parts with discrete, isometric or equally-long stanzas, each containing nine lines with the rhyme scheme AAAABCCCB where "B" always stands for "Camelot" in the fifth line and for "Shallot" in the ninth.

The Island of Shallot where the lady lived has been vividly portrayed through a number of pastoral imageries. The poem begins with a description of the river and a road, on either side of which lay large stretches of barley and rye fields that seemed to be stretching upto the sky, before reaching Camelot- a city of many towers. The river was frequented by both "heavy barges" and light open boats which sailed along the edges upto Camelot.

The people of the town travel along the road and look towards the island called Shallot, which lies further down the river. The banks of the island are dotted with lilies, aspens, and willows & the soft breeze rustled the leaves. The road too is lined with trees and on it one could see carriages laden with cargo and horses pulling them slowly.

The poet says that on this silent and lonely island, in a gray house made of "four gray walls and four gray towers", lived imprisoned, the mysterious Lady of Shallot. No one had ever seen or heard her except the early reapers in the barley field. They could hear the echoes of the happily sung song whose sound seemed to be floating on the river water that flowed to Camelot. In the moonlight, the weary reapers would whisper and wonder-

**"Tis the fairy
The Lady of Shallot."**

In the lonely grey tower, the lady sat beside the window, weaving day and night a colourful magical web as she had heard that if she stops to look out towards Camelot, a curse would befall her. Hence she weaved incessantly the indistinct images of the outside world reflected in the mirror that hung before her.

**And moving through a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear.**

Reflected in the mirror she saw the highway winding down to Camelot, the small whirls & ripples in the river or the faces of the ill-tempered peasants. Sometimes she saw a group of girls pass by or an abbot riding on a slow horse and sometimes a curly haired shepherd or a page with long hair, dressed in his crimson uniform walking towards Camelot.

Occasionally she saw groups of knights riding in rows towards the city. This made her feel sad and lonely as no knight had ever pledged his love or loyalty to her.

However, she carried on with her dreary activity uncomplainingly and continued to weave the reflections of the world which seemed to have a magical attraction for her.

The poet then portrays two paradoxical aspects of life; union through marriage and separation through death.

**A funeral, with plumes and lights
And music, went to Camelot;
Or when the Moon was overheard,
Came two young Lovers lately wed.**

The sight of the lovers predominantly brings out her lonely state, living in the shadows away from flesh and blood.

While the poet deepens the sense of mystery with words like 'magic' and 'curse', he also describes the isolated existence of the lady of Shallot who seems to be secluded from real world entities. Her world was full of inaction where she sat and wove the magical web day and night. In comparison to her monotonous and dull life, the world outside has been described as full of action and colour. The lady of Shallot hence yearned for the reality of the external world.

"I am half sick of shadows".

The appearance of Sir Lancelot-one of the most courageous knights of King Arthur has been portrayed by the poet in a remarkable manner through brilliant imageries. The flashing image of Sir Lancelot is in stark contrast to the grey and dull image of the Lady of Shallot.

He came through the barley fields proceeding towards Camelot, glazing and dazzling, every bit of his polished brazen armour shone in the sunshine. The poet says that the glittering image of the bridle encrusted with gems, seemed like the Milky Way galaxy. His bugle clanged against the armour while the bells rang merrily, symbolizing his cheerful mood. His helmet and the feather on it flashed like fire as he passed her window. On his sparkling shield, was a carving of a knight kneeling before a young Lady.

**His broad clear brow in sunlight glow'd;
On burnish'd hooves his war-horse trode;
From underneath his helmet flow'd
His coal-black curls as on he rode.**

He galloped alongside the remote island of Shallot in the clear blue sky. The shining jewels on his saddle and his entire brilliant image made him look like a meteor in the evening sky.

The lady of Shallot became completely spell-bound and captivated by the electrifying appearance of Sir Lancelot and fell in love with him at the first sight. She could no longer restrain herself and leaving her web and loom, took three steps to look down straight at Camelot.

**Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror crack'd from side to side;
'The curse is come upon me' cried
The Lady of Shallot.**

The poet now uses sharp short sentences to show some action in her inactive life and brings out the tragedy of the curse effectively. The bright colours of the previous stanzas become dark and ominous while the atmosphere abruptly changes to one of gloom and mourning. The woods turned pale and weary in the storm that had started all of a sudden and the east wind struggling hard against it. The skies broke out in rain and storm and the river too began to moan, as if complaining against the sudden change.

**Like some bold seer in a trance,
Seeing all his own mischance.**

The poet says that the lady of shallot was completely aware of her impending doom and just as a prophet or a man endowed with wisdom and vision foresees his own misfortune gradually approaching him but never loses his courage, the lady of Shallot too knew the source of her all her disaster and kept gazing at Camelot in a trance. She descended from her tower and found a boat and loosening the chain she lay in it. The currents moved it slowly towards Camelot while the lady of Shallot, dressed in a loose snowy white gown, sung her last song- a soft, low and mournful tune. As the boat floated between the hills covered with willow trees and fields, her body gradually froze and the lady finally died even before reaching the first house on the shore of Camelot. The boat carrying her shinning dead body continued to float near the towers, galleries and garden walls of the city, finally reaching the royal feast.

**Out upon the wharfs they came,
Knight and Burgher, Lord and Dame,
And around the prow they read her name,
The Lady of Shallot.**

The poem ironically ends with an atmosphere enveloped with silence, sorrow and curiosity as Sir Lancelot, who was also present at the banquet, remarking rather casually-

**"She had a lovely face;
God in his mercy lend her grace,
The Lady of Shallot"**

Oblivious to the truth that he had been the prime cause for her death.