

ZIPTALES™

Reading the Poem

The Lady of Shalott

The Poet



Alfred Tennyson, First Baron Tennyson (1809-1892) rose from relative obscurity to become one of the greatest names in English literature. Although of ancient and arguably royal lineage, his family was not wealthy. Alfred was educated by his clergyman father (George Tennyson), and then at Cambridge University. There he met Arthur Hallam, another gifted poet, who became his best friend. He had begun to write and publish verse in his teens, and in 1829 won the Chancellor's medal for his extraordinary talents. The death of his father forced him however to leave university before graduating. He travelled in Europe, and was greatly influenced by the grandeur of the scenery and its rich cultural traditions.



Reading the Poem

The Lady of Shalott

The Poet

He fell in love with a young lady called Emily Sellwood, but because of continuing financial problems did not marry her until he was 41 (1850), just as his public career was beginning to seriously take off. They were to have two children.



In 1833, Tennyson wrote '**The Lady of Shalott**', based on the myths surrounding King Arthur. It has endured as one of his most celebrated poems. The same year, his friend Hallam died suddenly, plunging Tennyson into grief. That grief was to lead in time to ***In Memoriam***, an elegy to Hallam and to youth, which is considered by many his greatest poem.

Tennyson's reputation grew rapidly, and by 1850 it was enough to have him appointed Poet Laureate (a kind of Poet in Chief of England) after the death of William Wordsworth.



Reading the Poem

The Lady of Shalott

The Poet

Two years later, his '**Ode on the Death of Wellington**' made him famous. Wellington was the great English general who won the Battle of Waterloo (against Napoleon). Tennyson's 1854 poem '**The Charge of the Light Brigade**', which commemorated (and celebrated) the infamous massacre of a cavalry brigade in the Crimean War – is possibly still the most well known of all war poems. In 1859, he produced ***Idylls of the King***, a magnificent epic verse work about King Arthur, Merlin and the Knights of the Round Table.

Tennyson enjoyed huge popularity in his later years, although his lush and romantic verse is now less in fashion. He was made a life peer by Queen Victoria in 1884. He lived with his wife until his death at an advanced age.

He is buried, like other English literary greats, in Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey.

'**The Lady of Shalott**' is not part of ***Idylls***, though clearly it is based on the Arthurian cycle of myths and legends.





Reading the Poem

The Lady of Shalott

The Poem



It appears to be inspired by a story in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485), the most important of all sources for the Arthurian myths. It concerns a lady, Elaine of Astolat, who falls in love with Sir Lancelot, and nurses him back to health after he is wounded, only to have her love rejected. She dies of grief.

Tennyson took this narrative fragment and, changing it significantly but with great artistry, wove it into the story we know. Using traditional elements of magic and fate, and evoking a lush setting, he transformed it into a Romantic classic. In *his* version, the unnamed 'Lady of Shalott' (living on an island in the river near Camelot) is trapped by a mysterious curse. She is forbidden, on pain of death, to look directly at the world. So she lives in her tower, and watches in her mirror, which reflects the scenes outside the window, across the river. As she watches, she weaves 'a magic web' (or tapestry).



Reading the Poem

The Lady of Shalott

The Poem



However, one day, as she watches, she spies Sir Lancelot riding by, singing as he goes. He is so handsome and perfect that she falls instantly in love with him. She forgets herself, and goes to look out the window. The mirror cracks, as the curse is enacted. She knows she is doomed. She comes out of her lonely tower, down to the river, and finds a boat. She writes her name upon it, and lies down in the boat. She floats down the river, singing as she goes. By the time the boat reaches Camelot, she is dead. A crowd gathers. Lancelot looks down at her body and blesses her.

The poem, with its themes of fate and unrequited love, struck a chord. Like other tales in the Arthurian cycle, it offered a rich pseudo-historical world full of gallantry and romance – an enticing alternative to the rather dull realities of Victorian England. It celebrated what seemed a far more heroic past. The figure of Sir Lancelot in particular – the ‘perfect knight’ - became the focus of chivalry and idealism. Its tragic heroine appealed to the reading public. The poem’s drama and beauty ensured its popularity, and it became a key subject of several famous paintings by members of the neo-Romantic Pre-Raphaelite movement.

ZIPTALES™

Reading the Poem

The Lady of Shalott

The Poem

It is easy, in the modern age, to dismiss its sentimentality – and indeed Tennyson himself has suffered from a lot of ‘revisionism’ over such matters. Feminists, in particular, have reason to criticise the fatal passivity of the Lady. But such criticisms are to take the poem out of its period and apply the standards of a different age – rather like complaining that grand opera has implausible plots (and ignoring the beauty of the music and the drama). In its own right, as a work of art, ‘The Lady of Shalott’ is quite magnificent – its superb repeated rhythms and brilliant rhyme pattern, and its haunting story, carrying the reader onward to the wonderfully theatrical conclusion.

The poem has quite a sophisticated and unusual structure. Each of the nineteen stanzas start with four rhyming lines (**a/a/a/a**) of eight syllables each, followed by a mixed set (**b/c/c/c/b**) of slightly shorter length. The meter is iambic (**soft/hard**).



Why is this poem famous? Because, almost single handedly, it sums up one of the most powerful of all myths – that of Camelot – and of chivalry. It is also a great, if one sided, love story. And for the sheer power of language, it is hard to beat.



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The Lady of Shalott

Glossary of Words

abbot	head of a monastery
ambling	walking at a slow, leisurely pace
aspens	deciduous trees
baldric	belt for a sword
bearded	of the silken tassels (hanging like beards) on the barley, and of the meteor's tail
bow-shot	the distance an arrow could fly
bower-eaves	the eaves (or windows) of her secluded place
blazen'd	emblazoned – ie beautifully decorated
bore	carried
brazen	bright, striking
bridle	harness on a horse's head (by which it is steered)
burgher	town dweller
burnished	polished brightly
casement	wooden framed window
cheer	sung
clad	clothed
countenance	face
damsels	young (unmarried) ladies
eddy	swirl of water
ere	before
fairy	magical, fated, mysterious
flitteth	moves rapidly about



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Glossary of Words

gallery	high walking area
gay	happy, jovial, attractive
gemmy	horse
greaves	protective armour plates on the knight's shin
imbowers	traps in a beautiful but confined place
mischance	bad luck, misfortune
pad	poor horse
page	assistant to a knight (page boy)
plumes	feathers, especially gorgeous decorative ones (like ostrich feathers)
prow	bow or front end (of a boat)
reaper	one who cuts the crop
seer	one who can foretell the future
shadows	reflections
shallop	small open boat
sheaves	bundles (of barley)
surly	ill-tempered
village-churls	village youths (male)
waning	losing their leaves
weaveth	weaves (a tapestry)
willow-veil'd	half-hidden by the willows
wold	open uncultivated land (a variant on 'wild')