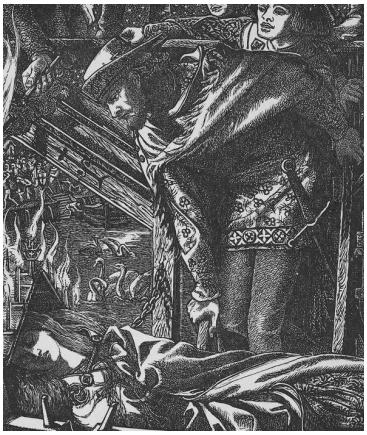
Name _____ Class _____ Date _____



The Lady of Shalott

by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Grades 9–12 · Common Core RL.9-10.4, RL.9-10.2, RL.9-10.5

Tennyson published the poem in 1832 and revised it for his Poems of 1842; our text is the 1842 version. It draws on legends of King Arthur's court at Camelot. Tennyson divided it into four parts of mostly nine-line stanzas (our page prints the stanzas without part headings), almost every stanza ending with "Camelot" in line 5 and "Shalott" in line 9. The story is often read as being about art, isolation and the cost of joining real life.

THE POEM

On either side the river lie
Long fields of barley and of rye,
That clothe the wold and meet the sky;
And thro' the field the road runs by
To many-tower'd Camelot:
And up and down the people go,
Gazing where the lilies blow
Round an island there below,
The island of Shalott.

Willows whiten, aspens quiver,
Little breezes dusk and shiver
Thro' the wave that runs for ever
By the island in the river
Flowing down to Camelot.
Four gray walls, and four gray towers,
Overlook a space of flowers,
And the silent isle imbowers
The Lady of Shalott.

By the margin, willow-veil'd,
Slide the heavy barges trail'd
By slow horses; and unhail'd
The shallop flitteth silken-sail'd
Skimming down to Camelot:
But who hath seen her wave her hand?
Or at the casement seen her stand?
Or is she known in all the land,
The Lady of Shalott?

Only reapers, reaping early
In among the bearded barley,
Hear a song that echoes cheerly
From the river winding clearly,
Down to tower'd Camelot:
And by the moon the reaper weary,
Piling sheaves in uplands airy,
Listening, whispers "'Tis the fairy
Lady of Shalott."

There she weaves by night and day
A magic web with colours gay.
She has heard a whisper say,
A curse is on her if she stay
To look down to Camelot.
She knows not what the curse may be,
And so she weaveth steadily,
And little other care hath she,
The Lady of Shalott.

And moving thro' a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear.
There she sees the highway near
Winding down to Camelot:
There the river eddy whirls,
And there the surly village-churls,
And the red cloaks of market girls,
Pass onward from Shalott.

Sometimes a troop of damsels glad,
An abbot on an ambling pad,
Sometimes a curly shepherd-lad,
Or long-hair'd page in crimson clad,
Goes by to tower'd Camelot;
And sometimes thro' the mirror blue
The knights come riding two and two:
She hath no loyal knight and true,
The Lady of Shalott.

But in her web she still delights
To weave the mirror's magic sights,
For often thro' the silent nights
A funeral, with plumes and lights
And music, went to Camelot:
Or when the moon was overhead,
Came two young lovers lately wed;
"I am half sick of shadows," said
The Lady of Shalott.

A bow-shot from her bower-eaves,
He rode between the barley-sheaves,
The sun came dazzling thro' the leaves,
And flamed upon the brazen greaves
Of bold Sir Lancelot.
A red-cross knight for ever kneel'd
To a lady in his shield,
That sparkled on the yellow field,
Beside remote Shalott.

The gemmy bridle glitter'd free,
Like to some branch of stars we see
Hung in the golden Galaxy.
The bridle bells rang merrily
As he rode down to Camelot:
And from his blazon'd baldric slung
A mighty silver bugle hung,
And as he rode his armour rung,
Beside remote Shalott.

All in the blue unclouded weather
Thick-jewell'd shone the saddle-leather,
The helmet and the helmet-feather
Burn'd like one burning flame together,
As he rode down to Camelot.
As often thro' the purple night,
Below the starry clusters bright,
Some bearded meteor, trailing light,
Moves over still Shalott.

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,
As he rode down to Camelot.
From the bank and from the river
He flash'd into the crystal mirror,
"Tirra lirra," by the river
Sang Sir Lancelot.

She left the web, she left the loom,
She made three paces thro' the room,
She saw the water-lily bloom,
She saw the helmet and the plume,
She look'd down to 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 Shalott.

In the stormy east-wind straining,
The pale yellow woods were waning,
The broad stream in his banks complaining,
Heavily the low sky raining
Over tower'd Camelot;
Down she came and found a boat
Beneath a willow left afloat,
And round about the prow she wrote
The Lady of Shalott.

And down the river's dim expanse—
Like some bold seër in a trance
Seeing all his own mischance—
With a glassy countenance
Did she look to Camelot.
And at the closing of the day
She loosed the chain, and down she lay;
The broad stream bore her far away,
The Lady of Shalott.

Lying, robed in snowy white
That loosely flew to left and right—
The leaves upon her falling light—
Thro' the noises of the night
She floated down to Camelot:
And as the boat-head wound along
The willowy hills and fields among,
They heard her singing her last song,
The Lady of Shalott.

Heard a carol, mournful, holy,
Chanted loudly, chanted lowly,
Till her blood was frozen slowly,
And her eyes were darken'd wholly,
Turn'd to tower'd Camelot;
For ere she reach'd upon the tide
The first house by the water-side,
Singing in her song she died,
The Lady of Shalott.

Under tower and balcony,
By garden-wall and gallery,
A gleaming shape she floated by,
A corse between the houses high,
Silent into Camelot.
Out upon the wharfs they came,
Knight and burgher, lord and dame,
And round the prow they read her name,
The Lady of Shalott.

Who is this? and what is here?
And in the lighted palace near
Died the sound of royal cheer;
And they cross'd themselves for fear,
All the knights at Camelot:
But Lancelot mused a little space;
He said, "She has a lovely face;
God in his mercy lend her grace,
The Lady of Shalott."

VOCABULARY

wold — open, rolling countryside

imbowers — shelters, encloses

shallop — a small light boat

casement — a window that opens on hinges

churls — rough country people

greaves — armor for the lower legs

baldric — a belt worn across the chest to hold a sword or bugle

blazon'd — decorated with a coat of arms

countenance — face, expression

burgher — a citizen of a town

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Where does the Lady live, and who knows she is there?

2. How does the Lady see the outside world? What does “I am half sick of shadows” tell you about her feelings?

3. Find three details that make Sir Lancelot dazzling. Why does he, of all the passers-by, make her turn?

4. What happens the moment she looks down to Camelot?

5. How do the people of Camelot react to her body, and what does Lancelot say? What might Tennyson be saying about the artist and the world?

WRITING PROMPT

Write a poem or short story (one page) about a character who has watched life only through a screen and finally steps outside. Show what they gain and what they risk.

The Lady of Shalott — Answer Key

1. In a tower of "Four gray walls, and four gray towers" on the island of Shalott, near Camelot. Only "reapers, reaping early" hear her song and whisper that she is a fairy.
2. Through "a mirror clear," where "Shadows of the world appear," and she weaves what she sees into her web. After seeing young lovers, she is tired of living through reflections instead of real life.
3. Any three: "The sun came dazzling thro' the leaves," "brazen greaves," "The gemmy bridle glitter'd," "mighty silver bugle," his "coal-black curls," his helmet that "Burn'd like one burning flame." He is full of life, light and color, and he sings "Tirra lirra."
4. "Out flew the web and floated wide; / The mirror crack'd from side to side," and she cries "The curse is come upon me."
5. They "cross'd themselves for fear"; Lancelot muses that "She has a lovely face" and asks God to "lend her grace." Accept supported answers, e.g. an artist who leaves isolation for the real world may be destroyed, or the world does not understand the artist.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/the-lady-of-shalott-alfred-lord-tennyson/