
- **“The Lady of Shalott” Themes**

- **Artistic Isolation**

“The Lady of Shalott” is often taken as a [metaphor](#) for artistic isolation—the idea that an artist must distance themselves from the world in order to truthfully depict it in their work. Here, the titular Lady is confined to a fairy-tale tower, where she endlessly weaves a gorgeous tapestry and watches the world go by in a magic mirror. She’s under a mysterious curse, and only finds out what it is when she looks away from her work and out her window into the real world. The things she sees there—the gorgeous Sir Lancelot, and the bustling, commercial, everyday world of Camelot—spell her doom. The Lady’s curse, which demands that she focus all her attention on images, is the curse of the artist, for whom observing the world can make fully experiencing the world impossible.

The Lady is not any old knitter, but rather an adept weaver who makes beautiful tapestries of the images she sees in a magic mirror that indirectly shows her the world passing by outside. She seems to take pleasure in her artistry, but feels trapped by it, too; while she “delights” in making her tapestries, she is also “half sick of shadows,” tired of only seeing the world through the lens of her artistic vision. In creating woven images of reflected images, she is at once deeply engaged with the world and painfully cut off from it.

And while she knows she’s cursed, she has no idea what her curse actually is (though she knows it will take hold if she looks toward Camelot). She thus stays at her loom, reveling in her skill, but also imprisoned by it.

It’s only when she looks out her window to see the handsome knight Sir Lancelot, rather than an *image* of him, that her mirror cracks and her weaving tears itself off its loom.

Connecting with the solid, physical world—even from a distance—is thus enough to break the Lady’s vision-granting mirror and to destroy her artistry. The Lady’s desire

for Lancelot (who might represent not only the normal human pleasures of sex, but the lure of glory and fame), can't coexist with the Lady's pure art-making.

The mirror and tapestry also seem to be a part of the Lady herself: as soon as they're broken, she feels herself beginning to die. Her final act is to get out of her tower and arrange herself in a boat so her corpse will drift downriver to Camelot. Yet even in this last effort to put herself into the world, the Lady still works like an artist: she inscribes her name on the boat like a title, arranges her own body like an artwork, and sings as she dies. The curse keeps her trapped within a world of distanced art-making even as she leaves her cloistered tower.

The Lady of Shalott's gift is thus also her tragedy. She is able to represent the truth and beauty of the world through gorgeous images, but can't touch the glories her images represent. Her life is so bound up in art-making that she can't survive reality. Some of Tennyson's own anxiety about being an artist might appear here, of course. He, too, was a weaver—of words rather than threads.

o **Victorian Women's Sexuality**

It's not just plain curiosity that at last pulls the Lady away from her loom, but also sexuality—in the form of the dreamy Sir Lancelot riding by. Sexuality here is presented as an image of deep involvement in the world, and therefore as the strongest possible temptation. It's also something dangerous, the poem suggests, destroying not just the Lady herself but also the art she makes.

Of course, that the Lady is a *lady* speaks to a particularly Victorian anxiety about *women's* sexuality, which was heavily policed: for Victorian women, virginity was idealized, and desire demonized. The poem suggests that such repression is fated to fail, however, and that restrained sexuality becomes a destructive force when it inevitably breaks through.

Even before Lancelot's arrival, there are hints that the Lady feels the absence of sexuality in her life as the greatest burden of her isolation. While she's described as taking "delight" in her solitary weaving, the poem also notes that there's no lover for her. When she finally declares that she's "half-sick of shadows," it's a vision of two young newlyweds that provokes her. The sight of joyful lovers, presumably dashing off to consummate their marriage, is the outer-world vision that has the strongest power over the Lady.

Sir Lancelot's appearance is described with loving care. He's both an idealized and an eroticized vision of masculinity, and it's his beauty that moves the lady to action. The Lady observes, not just his shining armor (representing his chivalrous virtues) and his lovely singing voice, but also his long curling hair. He seems to her to emit light like a meteor.

The instant he appears in the mirror, the Lady springs to her feet and rushes to the window. Lancelot physically compels her, making her body act before her mind can slow her down. Women's bodies, this scene suggests, won't accept unnatural restraints forever—and may break loose of the cultural superego's mental grip, expressing a destructive power.

The "curse" that falls on the Lady might thus be read as the curse of sexuality itself. The Lady never gets to fulfill her love for Lancelot. He only meets her after her death, when he remarks on her "lovely face." In this, she's rather like a classic Sleeping Beauty—a woman whose sexuality is utterly passive and frozen. However, considering that "dying" can be a euphemism for orgasm, there may be a hint here that the Lady is fulfilled—but that her fulfillment destroys her artistry and everything she's known.

The poem's anxiety about sexuality is thus stuck in the tension between the pain of sexual starvation and the destructiveness of sexual fulfillment. The Lady—like Victorian Englishwomen in general—is damned if she does and damned if she doesn't.

The speaker's sympathy for her provides a critique of this dilemma at the same time as it links restrained, virginal sexual energy with purity of artistic intent.