**LADY OF SHALOTT**

**Complete Text**

*PART I  
  
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.”  
  
   PART II  
  
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.  
  
      PART III  
  
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.  
  
      PART IV  
  
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,  
Dead-pale 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.”*

**Summary**

Part I: The poem begins with a description of a river and a road that pass through long fields of barley and rye before reaching the town of Camelot. The people of the town travel along the road and look toward an island called Shalott, which lies further down the river. The island of Shalott contains several plants and flowers, including lilies, aspens, and willows. On the island, a woman known as the Lady of Shalott is imprisoned within a building made of “four gray walls and four gray towers.”

Both “heavy barges” and light open boats sail along the edge of the river to Camelot. But has anyone seen or heard of the lady who lives on the island in the river? Only the reapers who harvest the barley hear the echo of her singing. At night, the tired reaper listens to her singing and whispers that he hears her: “ ‘Tis the fairy Lady of Shalott.”

Part II: The Lady of Shalott weaves a magic, colorful web. She has heard a voice whisper that a curse will befall her if she looks down to Camelot, and she does not know what this curse would be. Thus, she concentrates solely on her weaving, never lifting her eyes.

However, as she weaves, a mirror hangs before her. In the mirror, she sees “shadows of the world,” including the highway road, which also passes through the fields, the eddies in the river, and the peasants of the town. Occasionally, she also sees a group of damsels, an abbot (church official), a young shepherd, or a page dressed in crimson. She sometimes sights a pair of knights riding by, though she has no loyal knight of her own to court her. Nonetheless, she enjoys her solitary weaving, though she expresses frustration with the world of shadows when she glimpses a funeral procession or a pair of newlyweds in the mirror.

Part III: A knight in brass armor (“brazen greaves”) comes riding through the fields of barley beside Shalott; the sun shines on his armor and makes it sparkle. As he rides, the gems on his horse’s bridle glitter like a constellation of stars, and the bells on the bridle ring. The knight hangs a bugle from his sash, and his armor makes ringing noises as he gallops alongside the remote island of Shalott.

In the “blue, unclouded weather,” the jewels on the knight’s saddle shine, making him look like a meteor in the purple sky. His forehead glows in the sunlight, and his black curly hair flows out from under his helmet. As he passes by the river, his image flashes into the Lady of Shalott’s mirror and he sings out “tirra lirra.” Upon seeing and hearing this knight, the Lady stops weaving her web and abandons her loom. The web flies out from the loom, and the mirror cracks, and the Lady announces the arrival of her doom: “The curse is come upon me.”

Part IV: As the sky breaks out in rain and storm, the Lady of Shalott descends from her tower and finds a boat. She writes the words “The Lady of Shalott” around the boat’s bow and looks downstream to Camelot like a prophet foreseeing his own misfortunes. In the evening, she lies down in the boat, and the stream carries her to Camelot.

The Lady of Shalott wears a snowy white robe and sings her last song as she sails down to Camelot. She sings until her blood freezes, her eyes darken, and she dies. When her boat sails silently into Camelot, all the knights, lords, and ladies of Camelot emerge from their halls to behold the sight. They read her name on the bow and “cross...themselves for fear.” Only the great knight Lancelot is bold enough to push aside the crowd, look closely at the dead maiden, and remark “She has a lovely face; God in his mercy lend her grace.”

**Form**

The poem is divided into four numbered parts with discrete, isometric (equally-long) stanzas. The first two parts contain four stanzas each, while the last two parts contain five. Each of the four parts ends at the moment when description yields to directly quoted speech: this speech first takes the form of the reaper’s whispering identification, then of the Lady’s half-sick lament, then of the Lady’s pronouncement of her doom, and finally, of Lancelot’s blessing. Each stanza contains nine lines with the rhyme scheme *AAAABCCCB.* The “B” always stands for “Camelot” in the fifth line and for “Shalott” in the ninth. The “A” and “C” lines are always in tetrameter, while the “B” lines are in trimeter. In addition, the syntax is line-bound: most phrases do not extend past the length of a single line.

**Commentary**

Originally written in 1832, this poem was later revised, and published in its final form in 1842. Tennyson claimed that he had based it on an old Italian romance, though the poem also bears much similarity to the story of the Maid of Astolat in Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur.* As in Malory’s account, Tennyson’s lyric includes references to the Arthurian legend; moreover, “Shalott” seems quite close to Malory’s “Astolat.”

Much of the poem’s charm stems from its sense of mystery and elusiveness; of course, these aspects also complicate the task of analysis. That said, most scholars understand “The Lady of Shalott” to be about the conflict between art and life. The Lady, who weaves her magic web and sings her song in a remote tower, can be seen to represent the contemplative artist isolated from the bustle and activity of daily life. The moment she sets her art aside to gaze down on the real world, a curse befalls her and she meets her tragic death. The poem thus captures the conflict between an artist’s desire for social involvement and his/her doubts about whether such a commitment is viable for someone dedicated to art. The poem may also express a more personal dilemma for Tennyson as a specific artist: while he felt an obligation to seek subject matter outside the world of his own mind and his own immediate experiences—to comment on politics, history, or a more general humanity—he also feared that this expansion into broader territories might destroy his poetry’s magic.

Part I and Part IV of this poem deal with the Lady of Shalott as she appears to the outside world, whereas Part II and Part III describe the world from the Lady’s perspective. In Part I, Tennyson portrays the Lady as secluded from the rest of the world by both water and the height of her tower. We are not told how she spends her time or what she thinks about; thus we, too, like everyone in the poem, are denied access to the interiority of her world. Interestingly, the only people who know that she exists are those whose occupations are most diametrically opposite her own: the reapers who toil in physical labor rather than by sitting and crafting works of beauty.

Part II describes the Lady’s experience of imprisonment from her own perspective. We learn that her alienation results from a mysterious curse: she is not allowed to look out on Camelot, so all her knowledge of the world must come from the reflections and shadows in her mirror. (It was common for weavers to use mirrors to see the progress of their tapestries from the side that would eventually be displayed to the viewer.) Tennyson notes that often she sees a funeral *or* a wedding, a disjunction that suggests the interchangeability, and hence the conflation, of love and death for the Lady: indeed, when she later falls in love with Lancelot, she will simultaneously bring upon her own death.

Whereas Part II makes reference to all the different types of people that the Lady sees through her mirror, including the knights who “come riding two and two” (line 61), Part III focuses on one particular knight who captures the Lady’s attention: Sir Lancelot. This dazzling knight is the hero of the King Arthur stories, famous for his illicit affair with the beautiful Queen Guinevere. He is described in an array of colors: he is a “red-cross knight”; his shield “sparkled on the yellow field”; he wears a “silver bugle”; he passes through “blue unclouded weather” and the “purple night,” and he has “coal-black curls.” He is also adorned in a “gemmy bridle” and other bejeweled garments, which sparkle in the light. Yet in spite of the rich visual details that Tennyson provides, it is the sound and not the sight of Lancelot that causes the Lady of Shalott to transgress her set boundaries: only when she hears him sing “Tirra lirra” does she leave her web and seal her doom. The intensification of the Lady’s experiences in this part of the poem is marked by the shift from the static, descriptive present tense of Parts I and II to the dynamic, active past of Parts III and IV.

In Part IV, all the lush color of the previous section gives way to “pale yellow” and “darkened” eyes, and the brilliance of the sunlight is replaced by a “low sky raining.” The moment the Lady sets her art aside to look upon Lancelot, she is seized with death. The end of her artistic isolation thus leads to the end of creativity: “Out flew her web and floated wide” (line 114). She also loses her mirror, which had been her only access to the outside world: “The mirror cracked from side to side” (line 115). Her turn to the outside world thus leaves her bereft both of her art object and of the instrument of her craft—and of her very life. Yet perhaps the greatest curse of all is that although she surrenders herself to the sight of Lancelot, she dies completely unappreciated by him. The poem ends with the tragic triviality of Lancelot’s response to her tremendous passion: all he has to say about her is that “she has a lovely face” (line 169). Having abandoned her artistry, the Lady of Shalott becomes herself an  art object; no longer can she offer her creativity, but merely a “dead-pale” beauty (line 157).

## “My Last Duchess”- ALFRED LORD TENNYSON

“My Last Duchess”

### Complete Text

*That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall,  
Looking as if she were alive. I call  
That piece a wonder, now: Fra Pandolf’s hands  
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.  
Will’t please you sit and look at her? I said  
“Fra Pandolf” by design, for never read  
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,  
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,  
But to myself they turned (since none puts by  
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)  
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,  
How such a glance came there; so, not the first  
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, ’twas not  
Her husband’s presence only, called that spot  
Of joy into the Duchess’ cheek: perhaps  
Fra Pandolf chanced to say “Her mantle laps  
Over my lady’s wrist too much,” or “Paint  
Must never hope to reproduce the faint  
Half-flush that dies along her throat”: such stuff  
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough  
For calling up that spot of joy. She had  
A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad,  
Too easily impressed; she liked whate’er  
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.  
Sir, ’twas all one! My favour at her breast,  
The dropping of the daylight in the West,  
The bough of cherries some officious fool  
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule  
She rode with round the terrace—all and each  
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,  
Or blush, at least. She thanked men,—good! but thanked  
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked  
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name  
With anybody’s gift. Who’d stoop to blame  
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill  
In speech—(which I have not)—to make your will  
Quite clear to such an one, and say, “Just this  
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,  
Or there exceed the mark”—and if she let  
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set  
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,  
—E’en then would be some stooping; and I choose  
Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,  
Whene’er I passed her; but who passed without  
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;  
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands  
As if alive. Will’t please you rise? We’ll meet  
The company below, then. I repeat,  
The Count your master’s known munificence  
Is ample warrant that no just pretence  
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;  
Though his fair daughter’s self, as I avowed  
At starting, is my object. Nay, we’ll go  
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,  
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,  
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!*

### Summary

This poem is loosely based on historical events involving Alfonso, the Duke of Ferrara, who lived in the 16th century. The Duke is the speaker of the poem, and tells us he is entertaining an emissary who has come to negotiate the Duke’s marriage (he has recently been widowed) to the daughter of another powerful family. As he shows the visitor through his palace, he stops before a portrait of the late Duchess, apparently a young and lovely girl. The Duke begins reminiscing about the portrait sessions, then about the Duchess herself. His musings give way to a diatribe on her disgraceful behavior: he claims she flirted with everyone and did not appreciate his “gift of a nine-hundred-years- old name.” As his monologue continues, the reader realizes with ever-more chilling certainty that the Duke in fact caused the Duchess’s early demise: when her behavior escalated, “[he] gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together.” Having made this disclosure, the Duke returns to the business at hand: arranging for another marriage, with another young girl. As the Duke and the emissary walk leave the painting behind, the Duke points out other notable artworks in his collection.

### Form

“My Last Duchess” comprises rhyming pentameter lines. The lines do not employ end-stops; rather, they use *enjambment*—gthat is, sentences and other grammatical units do not necessarily conclude at the end of lines. Consequently, the rhymes do not create a sense of closure when they come, but rather remain a subtle driving force behind the Duke’s compulsive revelations. The Duke is quite a performer: he mimics others’ voices, creates hypothetical situations, and uses the force of his personality to make horrifying information seem merely colorful. Indeed, the poem provides a classic example of a dramatic monologue: the speaker is clearly distinct from the poet; an audience is suggested but never appears in the poem; and the revelation of the Duke’s character is the poem’s primary aim.

### Commentary

But Browning has more in mind than simply creating a colorful character and placing him in a picturesque historical scene. Rather, the specific historical setting of the poem harbors much significance: the Italian Renaissance held a particular fascination for Browning and his contemporaries, for it represented the flowering of the aesthetic and the human alongside, or in some cases in the place of, the religious and the moral. Thus the temporal setting allows Browning to again explore sex, violence, and aesthetics as all entangled, complicating and confusing each other: the lushness of the language belies the fact that the Duchess was punished for her natural sexuality. The Duke’s ravings suggest that most of the supposed transgressions took place only in his mind. Like some of Browning’s fellow Victorians, the Duke sees sin lurking in every corner. The reason the speaker here gives for killing the Duchess ostensibly differs from that given by the speaker of “Porphyria’s Lover” for murder Porphyria; however, both women are nevertheless victims of a male desire to inscribe and fix female sexuality. The desperate need to do this mirrors the efforts of Victorian society to mold the behavior—gsexual and otherwise—gof individuals. For people confronted with an increasingly complex and anonymous modern world, this impulse comes naturally: to control would seem to be to conserve and stabilize. The Renaissance was a time when morally dissolute men like the Duke exercised absolute power, and as such it is a fascinating study for the Victorians: works like this imply that, surely, a time that produced magnificent art like the Duchess’s portrait couldn’t have been entirely evil in its allocation of societal control—geven though it put men like the Duke in power.

A poem like “My Last Duchess” calculatedly engages its readers on a psychological level. Because we hear only the Duke’s musings, we must piece the story together ourselves. Browning forces his reader to become involved in the poem in order to understand it, and this adds to the fun of reading his work. It also forces the reader to question his or her own response to the subject portrayed and the method of its portrayal. We are forced to consider, Which aspect of the poem dominates: the horror of the Duchess’s fate, or the beauty of the language and the powerful dramatic development? Thus by posing this question the poem firstly tests the Victorian reader’s response to the modern world—git asks, Has everyday life made you numb yet?—gand secondly asks a question that must be asked of all art—git queries, Does art have a moral component, or is it merely an aesthetic exercise? In these latter considerations Browning prefigures writers like Charles Baudelaire and Oscar Wilde.