

Alfred, Lord Tennyson: “The Lady of Shalott”

- I. Tennyson’s place in Victorian literature
 - A. He became the most celebrated poet of the Victorian Period
 - B. He eventually earned over £10,000 per year
 - C. His poetry articulates the ideals and the fears of the era—the Victorian *zeitgeist*
 - D. His poetry also contains numerous references to science, including geology, biology, and astronomy
- II. Early history, dark days, and eventual success
 - A. He came from a family beset by mental illness and addictions
 - B. Joined the intellectual group known as “The Apostles” while at Cambridge, where he met his friend, Arthur Henry Hallam
 - C. Published his first collection of poetry, *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, in 1830
 - D. Hallam died of cerebral hemorrhage in 1833, at age 24
 - E. Hallam’s death inspired the poem, *In Memoriam, A.H.H.*, written over a sixteen-year period
 - F. 1830s and 1840s were dark days: hostile reviews, loss of money, postponement of marriage
 - G. By 1850, success:
 1. *In Memoriam* was published
 2. He succeeded Wordsworth as Poet Laureate when Wordsworth died
 - H. Later poems, such as *Idylls of the King*, contributed to a renewed interest in Arthurian romances
- III. *In Memoriam, A.H.H.*
 - A. 131 sections of poem cover a three-year period
 - B. The speaker moves from despair to gradual acceptance of his loss
 - C. Some of the poem’s memorable expressions of evolutionary theory, well before Charles Darwin
 1. “Nature, red in tooth and claw”
 2. Stanza 118 depicts the formation of the earth: “In tracts of fluent heat began / And grew to seeming-random forms / . . . / Till at the last arose the man”
- IV. “The Lady of Shalott”
 - A. Based very loosely on a character from the Arthurian romances
 - B. The magic mirror and the curse are Tennyson’s inventions
 - C. Formal characteristics
 1. A very musical sounding poem, with many rolling “R’s”
 2. Comprised of four-foot lines, with a three-foot line after every group of four lines.
 3. Employs frequent “feminine rhymes”: lines ending with a stressed and then unstressed syllable, for example:
 - a) *feather, leather, together*
 - b) *straining, waning, complaining*
 4. Much visual imagery as well as images of sound
 - D. Interpretations
 1. Often read as a metaphor for the relationship between the artist and the world
 - a) The lady’s loom represents art

- b) She is isolated from life and lives in her art;(must artists live apart?)
 - c) The mirror is often seen as the poetic imagination
 - d) She lives in a world of representations
 - e) Life is seen in the mirror and she in turn weaves them on her loom
 - f) Shadows appear, suggesting the story of Plato's cave
2. In Part II, her contentment is shattered when she looks at Camelot directly
 3. The mirror is cracked, and she boards her boat to sail to Camelot
 4. She dies before she reaches her destination
 5. Camelot seems unable to comprehend her
 6. Only Lancelot speaks, and can only comment on her beauty
 7. *Camelot* and *Shalott* are frequently contrasted
 - a) Camelot (ironically, for us) is real, a masculine world (Lancelot)
 - b) Shalott is a world of magic and representations, a feminine world (the Lady)