T
his poem, first written in 1832 and revised in 1842 is
 hugely\(^1\) popular\(^2\), inspiring more Victorian paint-
ings than any other poem. It is a wonderfully mysterious
story with a great philosophical backdrop\(^3\) but, as we
shall see, it has a crucial flaw\(^4\).

The Story
*The Lady of Shalott* \(\text{/ʃəˈlɒt/}\) tells the story of a young
woman who lives in a castle on an island in a river. She
is cursed\(^5\) so she can't leave the castle or even look out
of the window. She can, however, see what is reflected in
a mirror\(^6\), so she is indirectly aware of\(^7\) what goes on\(^8\)
outside. She spends her days weaving\(^9\) pictures of what
she sees out of the window. One day a knight in shining
armour\(^10\) – Sir Lancelot – rides past\(^11\) singing a song.
The Lady can't help but look\(^12\) out of the window. This
causes her mirror to crack and her loom\(^13\) falls apart\(^14\).
The Lady immediately knows that she is in trouble\(^15\) but
she also knows that because her fate is sealed\(^16\), she is
also free to act. So, she runs down to the river, finds a boat
and paints\(^17\) “The Lady of Shalott” on it. She then gets
into the boat and floats off down towards Camelot. As
she does, she gradually dies so, when the boat reaches\(^18\)
Camelot, it contains the dead body of a beautiful young
woman. Lancelot and the townspeople\(^19\) wonder\(^20\) who
this damsels\(^21\) was.
The Lady of Shalott: Contexts

Source
The Lady of Shalott is based on a 13th-century Italian story called Donna di Scalotta as well as on the story of ‘The Maid’ of Astolat in Sir Thomas Malory’s 15th-century Le Morte d’Arthur.

A Dysfunctional Family
The Lady of Shalott was written when Tennyson was 23, years before he became the godlike Poet Laureate of the Victorian Age. As a young man he was given to melancholy. This may have been partly because his father was a violent alcoholic clergyman with an addiction to opium. Depression ran in the family and two of Alfred’s bothers were mentally unstable: Edward was institutionalized in 1833 and Septimus received treatment for his mental problems. Alfred’s favourite brother, Charles, was addicted to opium like dad.

Le Morte d’Arthur
When Tennyson went to Cambridge he began an intense relationship with a young man called Arthur Hallam. There seems to have been a sexual attraction between them though it was probably not acted on physically.

In 1830, when Alfred was 21, he and Hallam volunteered for the army of the Spanish republican insurgent Torrijos who was fighting King Ferdinand VII. However, they quickly became disillusioned and returned to Britain.

In 1833, the year after Alfred wrote The Lady of Shalott, Hallam died suddenly. This was undoubtedly the greatest tragedy of Alfred’s life and he was emotionally unstable for the next decade.

1 maid – (in this case) damsel, virginal young woman
2 the title is in French to make it sound sexier but the text is in English
3 clergyman – churchman
4 to be institutionalized – be put in a mental institution
5 army – military organization
6 suddenly – quickly and unexpectedly
The Lady of Shalott: Analysis

Vicarious Living
The poem is enormously suggestive in that it deals with the age-old dichotomy of philosophers, Renaissance humanists, academics and artists about whether they should interpret the world from a distance or actually get involved in daily life.

The Lady experiences the world outside through a mirror, which is a bit like sitting at home and seeing society through the television. In the context, however, the mirror is appropriate since weavers used mirrors to see the progress of their work on the side of the tapestry which would eventually be the one people looked at. Metaphorically, however, the mirror represents the vicarious life. There are strong echoes here of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave (and, if you like, an indirect connection with the Matrix movies). The Lady impulsively chooses to experience life directly, to live even though this also means that she will die. She prefers that Sir Lancelot will know her name (from the name written on the boat) and that she once lived, to a continued isolation and non-existence (as far as the rest of the world is concerned).

Women in the World
At the same time, the story seems to be specifically about a woman and about the role ascribed to respectable women in Victorian society. Middle- and upper-class Victorian women were expected to be ‘the angel of the house’ existing in the domestic sphere and participating as little as possible in public life. These women were, like the Lady of Shalott, metaphorically buried alive in their homes. The domestic prison is a place of immobility, frustration and stasis. Tennyson had already explored this theme in Mariana (1830).

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The Lady of Schlock

As we have seen *The Lady of Shalott* has philosophical depth but it has a really silly rhyme scheme: AAAABC-CCB. This makes it sound like *doggerel* or, if you prefer, the *lyrics* of a really *naff* pop song. If you don’t believe me, try reading this verse without feeling nauseous:

Sometimes a *troop of damsels glad*⁶,
An *abbot*⁶ on an *ambling pad*⁷,
Sometimes a *curly shepherd-lad*⁹,
Or long-hair’d page in *crimson clad*¹⁰,
Goes by to *tower’d Camelot*;
And sometimes *thro*² the *mirror* blue
The *knights*¹⁴ come riding two and two:
She hath¹⁵ no loyal knight and true¹⁶,
The Lady of Shalott.

Not *queasy* yet? OK, try this one:

Lying, *robed in snowy white*¹⁸
That loosely flew to left and right¹⁹ –
The leaves upon her falling light²⁰ –
The noises of the night
She floated down to Camelot:
And as the *boat-head wound along*²¹
The willowy hills and fields among²².
They heard her singing her last song,
The Lady of Shalott.

If you can take any more of this – and if you can you’ve got a stronger stomach than I have! – you can hear the whole poem at: http://goo.gl/85Nih. Read the full text of the poem, fully footnoted, at www.yes-mag.com.

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¹*schlock* – (US English) trash, rubbish, garbage, (in this case) *doggerel*
²*doggerel* - inferior poetry that sounds ridiculous
³*lyrics* - the words (of a song)
⁴*naff* - bad, inferior
⁵*a troop of damsels glad* - a group of happy innocent young women
⁶*abbot* - churchman who manages an abbey (= type of monastery)
⁷*an ambling pad* - a lethargic old horse
⁸*curly* - curly-haired, whose hair is not straight
⁹*shepherd-lad* - boy who takes care of sheep
¹⁰*in crimson clad* - wearing dark red clothing
¹¹*tower’d* - towered, fortified
¹²*thro* - through
¹³*mirror* - looking glass (old fashioned)
¹⁴*knights* - (archaic) has
¹⁵*she hath no loyal knight and true* - she doesn’t have a faithful knight who is devoted to her
¹⁶*queasy* - nauseous
¹⁷*robed in snowy white* - wearing a white dress
¹⁸*that loosely flew to left and right* - that blew about in the wind
¹⁹*the leaves upon her falling light* - foliage gently fell on her
²⁰*as the boat-head wound along* - as the boat drifted down (= moved floating and carried by the current of) the river
²¹*the willowy hills and fields among* - past wooded hills and fields