The River

This is the first big image in the poem, and it comes up again and again after the first line. It's almost like the backbone of the poem, running through it and holding it up. Do you feel how the river sort of pulls the plot along? That's especially true toward the end, as the Lady begins her final journey. The movement of the river, its flow and its strength, is so key to this poem that it's not surprising that Tennyson leads out with this image.



- Line 1: The river is the first image, and so, in a way, everything is put in relation to the river. Camelot is down the river, the island is in the middle of the river, the fields are on either side of the river. Beginning, middle, and end, we keep coming back to the river.
- Line 13: In the line before this, the speaker has told us about the "wave that runs forever" down the river. We think this idea of an endless wave, a current that can't be stopped, is really key. The river is mostly peaceful and pretty, but there's something almost scary about this eternal wave. Finally, it's going to pull the Lady to her death.
- Line 120: As the situation with the Lady gets more serious, the river seems to pick up on her distress. In this line, we are told that the river is complaining. When you give human feelings to a non-human thing like a river, that's called **personification**. In this case it helps to emphasize the Lady's fate, which is apparently so tragic it can even make a river sad.

Camelot

Just the name of Camelot calls up **images** of amazing castles, kings and knights, and people living in peace and justice. Even in the fantasy world of this poem, it seems far away, untouchable until the very end. When we finally do see Camelot,

it's a place of joy and beauty, every bit as social and splendid as the island of Shalott was lonely and sad.

- Line 5: We won't point out every spot where Camelot comes up, since the word is used as a **refrain** in the fifth line of almost every stanza. We think that repetition is meant to make Camelot seem more like a far off dream than an actual place. It's almost like heaven, a place the Lady can dream about but not actually see.
- Line 158: In this line, the Lady finally gets to Camelot, the place we've heard so much about. It's a place full of happy people, but for the Lady it's fatal. She can't enter the world of knights and ladies except as a pale and silent corpse in a coffin. When the lady arrives, she brings her sadness with her, and the appearance of her body kills the "royal cheer" of Camelot. It's a powerful image, almost like two worlds crashing together.

The Island

The island in the river, cut off from the land and the outside world, is a major **symbol** of the Lady's isolation and loneliness.

- Line 9: When we first hear about the island, in the middle of all that natural description, it sounds like kind of a nice spot, surrounded by flowers. It's a little isolated, sure, but maybe that's a good thing it's peaceful, out of the way, off the beaten path, maybe the kind of place you'd like to have a cabin. It isn't until later that we learn about the sinister curse.
- Line 81: After the second stanza, the speaker actually doesn't use the word "island" again, but here he talks about "remote Shalott." That's an interesting phrase, and it shows how much our image of Shalott has changed. Now it seems lonely, and we know that, because of how remote the island is, the Lady will be separated from Lancelot as long as she stays there. The island has become like a prison, more like Alcatraz than some chilled-out little spot in the river.



The Lady of Shalott

Obviously she's the main character and a huge part of this poem, but is the Lady of Shalott a major **image**? Lancelot is almost buried in description, but we hear almost nothing about the Lady herself. Hair color, eyes, height? Those things aren't all crucial, but they'd help us to build a mental picture of our main character. In some ways, it feels like the speaker is trying to hold back an image of the Lady, to make her deliberately hard to imagine.

- Line 18: The first time we hear her name is as the closing line of the second stanza. We're going to hear the same thing a *lot* more before the poem is over. The Lady's name is a **refrain** that the speaker uses over and over. Her name almost starts to hypnotize us, like a magical spell.
- Line 71: Don't worry, we won't take you through all of the spots where the poem talks about the Lady, but we thought this one was worth mentioning. This is the place where the Lady admits her frustration with her life, and says she is "half sick of shadows." While we still don't get an image of her face, we can feel the strength of her personality in this moment, a glimmer of the independence and strong will that is about to blossom.
- Line 153: This is the end of the Lady's transformation, the moment of her death. She has moved from slavery and imprisonment to freedom, but it has cost her everything. Before she sang, now she is quiet. She was warm, now she is frozen. All of these are powerful **images** of loss and change. Eventually she becomes a sort of statue, a pale shape in a coffin-like boat.



The Magic Web

We think this is one of the most memorable and fascinating **images** in the poem. That's partly because of the use of the word "web." It must literally mean something like a tapestry, but when you hear that word, it's hard not to think of the lady as a kind of spider. There's some **irony** there though, because, while she seems to be in control, she's obviously caught in someone else's web. She should be the web-

weaving predator, but instead she turns out to be the prey of some unseen, mysterious force.

- Line 38: Here's where we first hear about the web. This is a powerful image for a few reasons. First of all, it's just a really cool-sounding idea. We imagine the web having an enchanted life of its own, like the brooms in "The Sorcerer's Apprentice." At the same time, the theme of weaving is an **allusion** to older stories, in particular the *Odyssey*. In that famous epic poem, the hero's wife, Penelope, sits by herself and weaves while she waits for her husband to return.
- Line 64: This line takes a kind of different angle from the other references to the web. It mentions specifically that the Lady enjoys her weaving. Looked at in this way, the web seems more like an expression of her talent and creativity than a terrible curse. That's the neat thing about weaving in this poem. It could be a **symbol** of creative freedom and possibility, or a boring and endless chore, a symbol of slavery and imprisonment.
- Line 109: The first thing the lady does to break away from her prison is to step away from the loom, where she's weaving. It's just a few steps, but they have major consequences. The turn away from the web represents her refusal to be a slave, her decision to pursue love and the outside world, even if it means her death.
- Line 114: The web and the mirror are the main **symbols** of the Lady's weird pseudo-life on the island. So when the web flies apart here, we know that her island life is over and something else is starting. Still, since this is an image of destruction, we get a little hint of her approaching doom.



The Mirror

This is the web's twin, the other half of the Lady's pair of magical props. Although the mirror brings the world to the Lady, it's nothing like the real thing. She sees images, shadows, a sort of half-world. It's like someone staying cooped up in her apartment watching TV for years. She'd know what was going on outside, but you couldn't really call that living could you? The Lady sees the world but she can't interact with it. In that way the mirror becomes another **symbol** of her intense, terrible isolation from the world.

- Line 46: Here's where the speaker introduces the mirror, which he calls a "mirror clear." Two lines later, he talks about how the mirror shows the "shadows of the world" (line 48). This idea of a clear mirror full of shadows is a bit of a **paradox**. How can something be shadowy and clear at the same time? It seems like the point here is that the mirror (like the web) is filled with bright colors and people of all kinds, but the Lady can tell that it isn't real. It doesn't have the intensity of real life; it's just a shadowy imitation.
- Line 65: The Lady's talent is that she can turn the sights of the mirror into an image in her web. It's because of this that we might think of the mirror and web as **metaphors** for the life of the artist. She can represent life, but she can't be a part of it. Artists, in a sense, are always taking a bird's-eye view, reproducing life from a distance. You can see how, if this went too far, it might make someone feel alienated and lonely and maybe even cursed like the Lady of Shalott. Maybe this poem is like a therapy session for Tennyson to gripe a little about his life.
- Line 106: The mirror, ironically, shows the Lady the thing that will break its spell over her. When Lancelot comes trotting into the mirror, everything changes for the Lady. Even a shadow of him in a mirror is enough to let her know she has to change her life. He must have been pretty hot. Seriously, would you risk your life for a reflection?



Sir Lancelot

We've said it before, but Lancelot is definitely the rockstar of this poem. Even in the Arthur legends, he has a reputation as an irresistible ladies' man. This poem spends a bunch of time letting us know how good he looks in his armor. Other than that, he doesn't have much to do – no dragons to slay or anything like that. All he has to do is show up and look good in a mirror, and he totally rocks the Lady of Shalott's world.

- Line 77: When he first shows up, he's gleaming in the sun, almost like he was on fire. To underline what a big event this is, Tennyson breaks a rule he keeps everywhere else in the poem. On this one occasion, instead of making "Camelot" the last word of the fifth line of the stanza, he uses "Lancelot" instead. It might not seem like a big deal, but it has a subtle effect, and it really points out how much the appearance of Lancelot shakes things up. The Lady's life is going to change completely.
- Line 82: In trying to capture the full awesomeness of Lancelot and his gear, the speaker uses a bunch of comparisons. In this case, he uses a **simile** to compare the horse's bridle, all covered in jewels, to a constellation of shining stars.
- Line 168: In Lancelot's last cameo appearance, we don't get as strong a visual image of him. Still, this moment lets us see another side of him, and it's also where he says his only real line. At this point, instead of being a glittery piece of eye-candy, he seems sensitive and thoughtful. He's also gracious and thoughtful toward the dead Lady, showing that he's not just handsome but a class act too. He is, in the world of the poem, a perfect guy, bold, chivalrous, handsome, and kind.

