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### Exploration of Theme



"Blue Shadows I" by Ken Steinkamp; [www.kensteinkamp.com](http://www.kensteinkamp.com)

*In this section, we aim to explore themes in popular literature, poetry, plays, art and music. In doing so, we gain new understandings and learn more through the words of the greats and the potent images of our collective histories. Write in, tell us your interpretations of your favorite works, and feel free to suggest the next piece of culture we research to divine its theme! Contact us! [themes@thewriteplaceatthewritetime.org](mailto:themes@thewriteplaceatthewritetime.org)*

In this issue, we take a deeper look into Arthurian legend by exploring the tragic tale of "The Lady of Shalott". There is the well-known interpretation of this story in the form of the poem by Tennyson. The other version of the story serves as source material to the poem but departs rather remarkably in different facets to further depict the Lady Elaine of Shalott, her gifts as a healer, Sir Launcelot's indifference and Guinevere's jealousy.

Tennyson's poem tells the darkly romantic story of a lady isolated in a tower, held there by a mysterious curse that will come upon her if she dares to look to Camelot directly. Instead of being part of the real world, she relies on a crystal mirror to reflect visions of the outside and weaves a magic web which portrays the images she sees in the reflections. "I am half-sick of shadows," she says in her isolation. One day she spies "bold Sir Launcelot". Overtaken with love at the sight of him, she paces the room and risking all, looks down to Camelot. The mirror cracks and the curse has come upon her as she has directly looked to the outside world. Being that her fate seems inevitable, she steps outside of the tower and discovers a boat, round which she writes, "The Lady of Shalott", so that in gliding down the river toward Camelot, they will know her once she arrives. She perishes mid-way in song.

"Who is this? And what is here?  
 And in the lighted palace near  
 Died the sound of royal cheer;  
 And they crossed themselves for fear,  
 All the knights at Camelot  
 But Launcelot mused a little space;  
 He said, 'She has a lovely face;  
 God in his mercy lend her grace,  
 The Lady of Shalott.'" - The Lady of Shalott by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

It has been suggested by Tennyson's biographer, Leonée Ormonde, that Tennyson's version is a reflection of the plight of the artist, working in isolation, who "weaveth steadily". Some critics feel it is a representation of the Victorian woman's isolated role in society while others contend that it is in actuality the way Tennyson personally viewed the world.

The tale of Elaine brings another layer to the story. She is the source material for The Lady of Shalott. When Launcelot decides to go to a tournament in disguise, he stops by her father's castle where he is warmly entertained. He wears the armor of her brother, Tor, who is ill and does the lady the courtesy of wearing her scarf at the tournament. Her gentle spirit is already deeply in love with this mystery knight who had not revealed his true identity. Being severely injured at this tournament, Launcelot is returned to Shalott where he is nursed back to health by the medical skill of Lady Elaine. Promising to return to his queen, Launcelot departs, giving her love for him no hope. She climbs into a boat headed toward Camelot with a letter telling of her unrequited love, knowing her death is imminent.

Yet another version hints that the young maiden's adoration of Launcelot got her banished from court by Guinevere, thus resulting in her isolation. Launcelot had been living in the forest and was attacked by a wild boar. A poor hermit discovered him and tried to heal his wounds. Asleep by a well, the knight was discovered by Elaine. Finding refuge at her father's castle and being built a palace by good King Pellinore, he appeared to be content to stay and never return to Camelot. His passion for knighthood tugged at him, however. He attended a tournament in Tor's armor. Gravely wounded he was again nursed by the tender Elaine. Launcelot's thoughts turned toward Camelot once more. He left without a glance or a wave to the kind lady. Guinevere rejoiced at his return. Elaine then wandered her castle, heartbroken, singing, "The Song of Love and Death". She devised a letter to Launcelot and his queen. Along the river inside of the boat, she drifted down to Camelot. Her lovely face was quickly recognized by the other knights. Launcelot wept openly reading the letter and surmised that the young lady's love was far more tender than Guinevere's or that of any woman.

Many variations of this tale have appeared in literature, art, film and music. The Arthurian legend is timeless as its characters are vividly drawn, the plot poetic, and the emotion dramatically depicted. Write in with your thoughts!  
[themes@thewriteplaceatthewritetime.org](mailto:themes@thewriteplaceatthewritetime.org)

Recommended Reading: Thomas L. Jeffers, "Nice Threads: Tennyson's Lady of Shalott as Artist," Yale Review 89 (Fall 2001), 54-68.

*Bulfinch's Age of Chivalry or King Arthur and His Knights* revised by Rev. J. Loughran Scott

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Lady\\_of\\_Shalott](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lady_of_Shalott)

The following is a discovered YouTube Video of Celtic, Grammy-Nominated artist Loreena McKennitt (*interviewed in our summer 09' issue- for additional info see Archives*) performing live at the Juno Awards the verses of Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" from her album, *The Visit*.

Album produced by Loreena McKennitt. Co-produced by Brian Hughes.

This musical version by McKennitt captures the essence of the story in a most profound way.

Visit Loreena's site at:

<http://www.quinlanroad.com/explorethemusic/thevisit.asp>

YouTube video:

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MU\\_Tn-HxULM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MU_Tn-HxULM)

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