

Introduction to Reading “Lady of Shalott”

When you try to understand a piece of writing, you can use three methods, usually together:

- Research secondary sources – read what others say about the work
- Read for pleasure to see what emotional effects the work has on you
- Do close reading of the work itself to see how it creates those effects

Do not do these in any particular order. In fact, ideally, you will mix all three methods.

Close reading means that you read the work with a pen in your hand and writing paper beside you. You read a line, stanza, or paragraph, and then you think about it. You write down your questions and observations. You read on.

Close reading is very different from reading for pleasure. Your mind should be active, probing, wondering. You do not suspend disbelief. Instead, you examine the words, sentences, symbols, characters, and plot, as well as anything else that interests you. And you remember that to analyze something means to pull it into pieces. Strangely, good writing not only survives this treatment, but your respect for it and your pleasure in it increases afterwards.

To show you how close reading works, I have reproduced Tennyson’s poem “The Lady of Shalott.” I have written down my thoughts for the first few stanzas. I would like for you to finish annotating the poem in the same manner that I did. These notes will be helpful when you prepare to write a paragraph.

You will get more from this activity if you pause after every section of the poem to think about it and write down your own thoughts about it. Remember that your thoughts are not “wrong” and mine are not “right.”

The Story

The Lady of Shalott is a magical being who lives alone on an island upstream from King Arthur’s Camelot. Her business is to look at the world outside her castle window in a mirror, and to weave what she sees into a tapestry. She is forbidden by the magic to look at the outside world directly. The farmers who live near her island hear her singing and know who she is, but never see her.

The Lady sees ordinary people, loving couples, and knights in pairs reflected in her mirror. One day, she sees the reflection of Sir Lancelot riding alone. Although she knows that it is forbidden, she looks out the window at him. The mirror shatters, the tapestry flies off on the wind, and the Lady feels the power of her curse.

An autumn storm suddenly arises. The lady leaves her castle, finds a boat, writes her name on it, gets into the boat, sets it adrift, and sings her death song as she drifts down the river to Camelot. The locals find the boat and the body, realize who she is, and are saddened. Lancelot prays that God will have mercy on her soul.

This is one of Tennyson’s most popular poems. The Pre-Raphaelites like to illustrate it. Waterhouse made three separate paintings of “The Lady of Shallott.” Agatha Christie wrote a Miss Marple mystery entitled, “The Mirror Crack’d From Side to Side,” which was made into a movie starring Angela Lansbury. *Tirra Lirra by the River*, by Australian novelist Jessica Anderson, is the story of a modern woman’s decision to break out of confinement.

The Assignment

Finish annotating the poem. Then, on a large sticky note (poster sized, provided by me), Write the following:

1. Your Thesis Statement
2. 3 Assertions (Topic Sentences)
3. Expand your final assertion:
 - Provide at least 2 pieces of text evidence.
 - Provide adequate analysis/commentary for each example.

Remember to write in third person, present tense, active voice—avoid “Be” verbs when possible.