In Tennyson's poem 'The Lady of Shalott,' we see a mysterious maiden who is imprisoned by the fear of a curse in the days of King Arthur. In this lesson, we will see how her story unfolds.

**The Setting of the Poem**

**'The Lady of Shalott'** is one of Alfred Lord Tennyson's most famous poems. Its setting is medieval, during the days of King Arthur. Near Camelot is the Island of Shalott, where a beautiful young maiden is imprisoned. She, the Lady of Shalott, must not look at Camelot but can only see what is reflected in a mirror as she works on weaving a magical web. If she looks at Camelot, she will be cursed.

**The Format of the Poem**

The poem is written in four parts. Each stanza has nine lines that are written with a rhyme scheme of a-a-a-a-b-c-c-c-b. In many of the stanzas, the last line reads, 'The Lady of Shalott.' Tennyson repeats her name over and over to emphasize both her person and tragic circumstances. When we finish reading the poem, we remember her name and the hauntingly beautiful image she portrays.

**Part One of the Poem**

In part one, we are introduced to the mystery of the young lady who is imprisoned on the Island of Shalott, in the middle of a river that flows down to Camelot. Few know of her, but early in the morning, reapers can hear her sing a cheery song; they call her 'the fairy Lady of Shalott.'

**Part Two of the Poem**

The Lady of Shalott spends her time weaving a 'magic web with colours gay.' She has heard a whisper telling her that if she looks at Camelot, she will be cursed. She doesn't know what the curse will be, but she takes care not to look. However, as she weaves, she looks into a clear mirror in front of her that somehow reflects the comings and goings of Camelot. The mirror is her only link to the outside world. But what she sees -- funerals, young lovers -- makes her discontent with the 'shadow' images in the mirror. She longs for something that is real, saying, 'I am half-sick of shadows.'

**Part Three of the Poem**

In this section, we see a lengthy description of Sir Lancelot. He is described as bold, with shield and armor, almost like a star in a galaxy. His helmet has a feather, and his saddle, jewels. He is astonishingly handsome, with 'coal-black curls', and he catches the eye and heart of the Lady of Shalott as he rides by the banks of the river singing 'Tirra Lirra.' This is how she responds:

She left the web, she left the loom,  
She made three paces thro' the room,  
She saw the water-lily bloom,  
She saw the helmet and the plume,  
 She look'd down to Camelot.  
Out flew the web and floated wide;  
The mirror crack'd from side to side;  
'The curse is come upon me,' cried  
 The Lady of Shalott.

This young woman is so taken by Sir Lancelot that she stops her work and looks at Camelot, though she risks the mysterious curse. The mirror actually breaks, and her web is either thrown out of the window where it floats down the river or magically floats out of the window on its own. The Lady of Shalott realizes she is cursed.

**Part Four of the Poem**

The weather is extremely bad and stormy, but the Lady of Shalott races down to the banks of the river, finds a boat, and scribbles her name around the edge of it. She then enters the boat, wearing a flowing white dress, and begins to float downstream toward Camelot, at sunset. She sings as she floats onward; others hear a 'carol, mournful, holy' that she 'chanted loudly, chanted lowly'. It must have been terribly cold out, because the poor woman freezes to death before she reaches the first house in Camelot.

The lords and ladies of Camelot all come out and look at her, dead and lovely in the boat. They read her name and 'cross themselves' in fear. Who is this woman? What happened? Then, in a moment of irony, Sir Lancelot himself bows down next to her and says, 'She has a lovely face; God in his mercy lend her grace, The Lady of Shalott.'