

Name: _____ Class: _____

Tristan and Isolde

The Love Sin

By Lady Jane Wilde
1871

Lady Jane Wilde (1821-1896) was an Irish poet who had a special interest in Irish folktales, which she helped to gather. The tale of Tristan and Isolde has roots in Celtic myth and Arthurian legends. In most versions, Tristan fetches Isolde for his uncle King Mark to marry, but on the journey they ingest a love potion and fall for each other instead. As you read, take notes on how the poem's use of diction and imagery contribute to its central themes.

- [1] None, unless the saints above,
Knew the secret of their love;
For with calm and stately grace
Isolde¹ held her queenly place,
[5] Tho' the courtiers² hundred eyes
Sought the lovers to surprise,
Or to read the mysteries
Of a love—so rumour said
By a magic philtre³ fed,
[10] Which for ever in their veins
Burn'd with love's consuming pains.
Yet their hands would twine⁴ unseen,
In a clasp 'twere⁵ hard to sever;⁶
And whoso⁷ watched their glances meet,
[15] Gazing as they'd gaze for ever,



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1. Based on Celtic and Arthurian legends, the character of Isolde is a princess of Ireland; the wife of King Mark of Cornwall; and the lover of Sir Tristan, an Arthurian knight and the nephew of Mark.
2. **Courtier (noun):** a person who attends a royal court as a companion or adviser to the king or queen
3. **Philter (noun):** a love potion
4. **Twine (verb):** to wind or spiral around something; to intertwine
5. Contraction meaning "it were"
6. **Sever (verb):** to part or divide
7. **Whoso (pronoun):** archaic term for whoever or whosoever

- Might have marked⁸ the sudden heat
Crimson⁹ on each flushing cheek,
As the tell-tale blood would speak
Of love that never should have been
- [20] The love of Tristan and his Queen.
But, what hinders¹⁰ that the two,
In the spring of their young life,
Love each other as they do?
Thus the tempting thoughts begin
- [25] Little recked¹¹ they of the sin;
Nature joined them hand in hand,
Is not that a truer band
Than the formal name of wife?
Ah! what happy hours were theirs!
- [30] One might note them at the feast
Laughing low to loving airs,¹²
Loving airs that pleased them best;
Or interchanging¹³ the swift glance
In the mazes of the dance.
- [35] So the sunny moments rolled,
And they wove bright threads of gold
Through the common web of life;
Never dreaming of annoy,¹⁴
Or the wild world's wicked strife;¹⁵
- [40] Painting earth and heaven above
In the light of their own joy,
In the purple light of love.
Happy moments, which again
Brought sweet torments¹⁶ in their train:
- [45] All love's petulance¹⁷ and fears,
Wayward¹⁸ doubts and tender tears;
Little jealousies and pride,
That can loving hearts divide:
Murmured vow and clinging kiss,
- [50] Working often bane¹⁹ as bliss;
All the wild, capricious changes
Through which lovers' passion ranges.

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8. **Mark (verb):** to note or notice
 9. **Crimson (verb):** (of a person's face) to become flushed; to blush
 10. **Hinder (verb):** to impede or get in the way of something
 11. **Reck (verb):** to pay heed to something
 12. **Airs (noun):** expression or appearance
 13. **Interchange (verb):** to exchange something
 14. **Annoy (noun):** archaic term for harm, attack, or danger
 15. **Strife (noun):** conflict, dispute
 16. **Torment (noun):** severe physical or mental suffering
 17. **Petulance (noun):** the quality of being childishly sulky or bad-tempered
 18. **Wayward (adjective):** difficult to control or predict because of unusual behavior
 19. **Bane (noun):** a cause of great distress or annoyance

Yet would love, in every mood,
Find Heaven's manna²⁰ for its food;
[55] For love will grow wan²¹ and cold,
And die ere ever it is old,
That is never assailed²² by fears,
Or steeped in repentant²³ tears,
Or passed through the fire like gold.
[60] So loved Tristan and Isolde,
In youth's sunny, golden time,
In the brightness of their prime;
Little dreaming hours would come,
Like pale shadows from the tomb,
[65] When an open death of doom
Had been still less hard to bear,
Than the ghastly,²⁴ cold despair
Of those hidden vows, whose smart
Pale the cheek, and break the heart.

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20. **Manna** (*noun*): spiritual nourishment (in the Old Testament, this sustenance is provided to the Israelites from heaven)
 21. **Wan** (*adjective*): weak; pale; giving off the impression of illness or exhaustion
 22. **Assail** (*verb*): to attack
 23. **Repentant** (*adjective*): remorseful or regretful
 24. **Ghastly** (*adjective*): frightful; unpleasant

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which of the following best describes the central conflict in this poem? [RL.3]
 - A. The central conflict in this poem is between Tristan and Isolde because they cannot decide if their love is true or fake.
 - B. The central conflict in this poem revolves around the secrecy of Tristan and Isolde's love, and the strife this secret brings them (as they keep it from King Mark).
 - C. The central conflict in this poem is between King Mark and Sir Tristan, as they fight for Isolde's love and hand in marriage.
 - D. The central conflict in this poem deals mostly with the rumors being spread by the courtiers, who threaten to tell the king of the queen's faithlessness.

2. PART A: Which of the following best summarizes the narrator's use of imagery when describing the height of Tristan and Isolde's love? [RL.4]
 - A. The narrator describes their love using images of light, sun, and other typically golden images that portray innocence and happiness.
 - B. The narrator describes their love using images of darkness and obscurity, suggesting that their acts are shameful and should be hidden.
 - C. The narrator describes their love using images of natural power—such as a storm—suggesting that not only is their love powerful but dangerous.
 - D. The narrator describes their love with images of pain and death to imply that their love is doomed to end in tragedy.

3. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A? [RL.1]
 - A. "Little recked they of the sin; / Nature joined them hand in hand, / Is not that a truer band / Than the formal name of wife?" (Lines 25-28)
 - B. "So the sunny moments rolled, / And they wove bright threads of gold / Through the common web of life" (Lines 35-37)
 - C. "Yet would love, in every mood, / Find Heaven's manna for its food; / For love will grow wan and cold" (Lines 53-55)
 - D. "Like pale shadows from the tomb, / When an open death of doom / Had been still less hard to bear, / Than the ghastly, cold despair" (Lines 64-67)

4. PART A: What does the word "capricious" most likely mean in line 51? [RL.4]
 - A. Annoyed
 - B. Greedy
 - C. Inconsistent
 - D. Steady

5. PART B: Which of the following phrases best supports the answer to Part A? [RL.1]
 - A. "In the light of their own joy, / In the purple light of love." (Lines 41-42)
 - B. "Little jealousies and pride, / That can loving hearts divide" (Lines 47-48)
 - C. "Murmured vow and clinging kiss" (Line 49)
 - D. "wild... changes / Through which lovers' passion ranges" (Lines 51-52)

6. What does the conclusion of the poem (Lines 60-69) suggest about Tristan and Isolde, and how does this impact the overall meaning of the poem? [RL.5]

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In the context of this poem, how does love emerge? Is the love between Tristan and Isolde true? Is their love an act of betrayal towards Mark? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.