



MAJOR THEMES OF ALFRED LORD TENNYSON'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an effort to depict the representative Victorian poet A. L. Tennyson. It throws light on his literary background, most important influences on him, his great works and the major themes he was interested in etc. It describes the great impact of that particular period in the history of Victorian England on the poet and his works and how successfully and beautifully he captures and captivates the same in his myriad poems. The great patriotic spirit of Tennyson, his love for Nature and especially for the English countryside and how it abounds in his poems is analyzed along with the very patriotic spirit brimming through his works. To delineate as to how clearly and cleverly he depicts his themes, different poems dealing with the same are discussed in brief. His famous poem "In Memoriam" as an example for various themes is also dealt with. The paper concludes with the assertion that Tennyson is a popular Victorian Poet whose contribution to the realm of English poetry is immensely rich.

Key Words: *Heritage, Mellifluous, Blank verse, scepticism, myriad, artistic isolation, unquenchable thirst, dramatic monologue etc.*

INTRODUCTION

Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) was a well-known English poet of the Victorian Era. The most representative poet of the Victorian Age, he was Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom for much of the Victorian Period. He was a patriot as he had great love for and pride in his

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country and its rich heritage. He tried his level best and with great success to portray in his poems the Victorian England as it is with all its peculiar characteristics. It is quite admirable that when poets like Robert Browning had evinced no interest at all in the England of the Victorian Era, Tennyson was profoundly attracted to it. With utmost sincerity he captures and recreates the very essence of the same through his wonderful poems. His short lyrics are especially remarkable and widely acclaimed for their mellifluous music. His immense fascination for classical/ mythological themes deserves special mention here. Tennyson had written poems in Blank Verse also. It is quite noteworthy that most of the phrases from his poems are commonly used and he is the most frequently quoted writer. Just like his contemporaries, Tennyson too was heavily influenced and assailed by the new movements of science, scepticism and criticism characteristic of the period. Some of the remarkable features of his poetry are: its clearness of conception, noble simplicity of expression, its discernment of the beautiful etc.

Major Themes of his Poetry

As has been mentioned above Tennyson had special aptitude and liking for the Victorian England and its special attributes which finds an echo in almost all his poems. Other than these, as a literary artist of very high order, he had handled a host of themes in his poetry with utmost care and perfection. As it is not possible to deal with all of the themes and poems in this paper, only the major ones are illustrated here. They are *Death, Nature, Grief, Artistic Isolation, Spirituality, Time, Courage etc.* The first of the above mentioned, *Death* is dealt herewith.

Death:

It is observed that most of the poets had a special liking for the theme of death. Similarly Tennyson too was highly attracted to it and especially after the sudden death of his close friend Arthur Henry Hallam, he had an obsession for the same. A careful reading of Tennyson's poems reveal that he treats Death in a truly sustained and deeply personal manner. His friend's untimely death in a way had paved the way for his writing many a great poem of this genre. Some of his poems dealing with the theme of *death* are: **Ulysses, Tithonus, The two Voices, In Memoriam, Crossing the Bar etc.**

In **Ulysses**, Tennyson brings to life a great, indefatigable brave heart, the legend Ulysses whose untiring spirit and his inexhaustible thirst for adventure, the will and determination to travel the boundless ocean and to conquer new landscapes, irrespective of his old age deserve praise and recognition from the young and old alike. Ulysses is the Latin name for the character Odysseus from Greek Mythology. This poem is one of the best examples of dramatic monologue in English poetry. As a young man, Ulysses had had many remarkable



adventures before returning home to rule his lands. Now, as an old man, after years of peace and quiet prosperity, Ulysses is growing increasingly restless. He yearns to set out on voyages of exploration again. After entrusting the care of his kingdom to his son, Telemachus, he declares that he will live life to the fullest. Though his body is weak, his spirit is still as strong as ever. Unsatisfied with the boring life in Ithaca, after entrusting it to the care of his son, Ulysses sets out with his same spirited friends in search of new adventure, undeterred by the impending doom of death. His spirit to drink life to the lees (last drop), live life to the fullest, is really commendable and unquestionably teaches a valuable lesson to those who commit suicide, and those who curse life and waste away, living a life in death. The lines of this poem are most quoted by many and undoubtedly Ulysses' unquenchable adventure and thirst for knowledge serve as an unending source of inspiration for many even today.

Similarly in **Tithonus**, Tennyson beautifully depicts the weariness of life on this earth when all one craves for is, to fade into the earth and no longer linger on..... But in the poem **Two Voices** the poet wonderfully delineates a debate about whether or not to commit suicide.

In Memoriam

Tennyson had achieved great name, fame and recognition with the publication of his collected poems in 1842 and it went spiraling to its zenith with the publication of *In Memoriam* in 1850. This marvelous creation that came out of his extreme grief had paved the way for Tennyson's recognition as the greatest poet of his times. This had made him extremely famous and his poetry was read and appreciated over the greater part of the English speaking world. *In Memoriam* can in short be seen as Tennyson's lengthy meditation on his profound agony at the death of Arthur Henry Hallam and also his deep desire to know and experience what happens after death and his soul-stirring longing to die which will join him with his friend. Fortunately for the readers, as the poem proceeds, after pouring out his intense sorrow through deep mourning, the poet comes to terms with the reality of death in the natural cycle of life. The new realization dawns on him that he can still find pleasure on earth and he has to pull on till his death. With a resurrected and newly found hope he eagerly looks forward to his reunion with his beloved friend Hallam and realizes that the untimely death of his friend had metamorphosed his transcendence to a higher and superior spiritual condition.

Crossing the Bar is one of Tennyson's last works. In this poem the poet is depicted in a different mood who is ready to accept death and he looks upon and eagerly waits for his passage from life to death as a meaningful and happy occasion.



A close analysis of the above mentioned poems and all poems of Tennyson dealing with death reveals that he treats the theme of death with its myriad shades in a truly sustained and deeply personal manner.

The second theme that had an enticing effect on the poet was **Nature**.

Nature:

Another theme to which Tennyson had a great affinity was none other than **Nature** which plays a pivotal role in his poetry. Sometimes she is portrayed as both beguiling and sensuous. The best example for this is the poem **Lotus Eaters**. As far as Tennyson is concerned, Nature is also an omnipresent reminder of the cycle of life from birth to death and if anyone dares to exist outside of that cycle, the outcome will definitely be grief, separation and loneliness- from a human being's mortal self, the result of which can most probably be disastrous. On many occasions, the poet portrays Nature as a reminder of the vitality of life and one's existence, but sometimes the same Nature serves as a metaphor for death. **Break, Break, Break** is the best example for the former and **Crossing the Bar** for the latter. In some other poems Nature is presented as chaotic, hostile and totally indifferent to Man. Though Tennyson depicts Nature in its myriad hues and moods, each and every poem of his dealing with Nature is characteristically imbued with that Tennysonian touch.

The third theme which was quite near to the poet's heart was **Spirituality**.

Spirituality:

Though in many of his poems Tennyson's devout faith in Christianity is clearly manifested, it is in its supreme in the poem **In Memoriam** and hence only that is mentioned here. Though he mourns for the irreparable loss of his friend in the beginning of the poem, slowly the poet's adherence to Christian faith comes to his rescue and in the end of the poem the sad and hopeless tone of the beginning is transformed to one of great optimism. Here it is seen that Tennyson's lapses in faith are reconciled and from the dim path of doubt the brightness of acceptance dawns before him. Leaving all his doubts, complains and desolations quite strongly he realizes and accepts that God almighty has a clear plan for every human being created by him. Tennyson affirms here the truth that each and every individual creation of God inhabiting this earth..... is not by any coincidence or accident but on the contrary, it is the fulfilment of God the creator's divine wish and will.

The fourth theme in which the poet has profound interest is **Time**.

Time:



A detailed analysis of the different poems of Tennyson reveals that many of his poems reflect the poet's working through the implications of time. The general assumption reflected in these poems can be summed up as life is very short and fleeting fast, generally it is seen that many people simply sit and groan, blame others for one's own short comings and make a hell on earth and pine away.....forgetting and neglecting all the beauty and blessings bestowed on them by God. The poet strongly opines that such a life is a mere wastage and he exhorts one and all to savour and live happily and meaningfully when the great gift of life is open before them.

The fifth theme for which Tennyson had a great fascination is **Courage** and he beautifully displays this in his poetry.

Courage:

It's a characteristic feature of Tennyson that his greatest poems commemorate giants with Himalayan personality fighting valiantly against challenges or exhibiting great courage and unique defiance of spirit. Even under duress also these great heroes of Tennyson are delineated as embodiments of infinite courage and potential. Some poems that serve as best example are **The Charge of the light Brigade, The Princess: a Medley, Morted' Arthur and Ulysses**. Tennyson's heroes and heroines are so mighty and boldly brave that they dare to defy death even. The character of **Princess Ida** and **Ulysses** are unquestionable and irrevocable examples. Thus it can be asserted beyond any doubt that the Greatest Tennysonian virtue is none other than Courage itself.

CONCLUSION

After going through the major themes and all the poems and the details discussed above it is quite clear that unquestionably Alfred Lord Tennyson is a famous Victorian poet who had authored popular lyric poems like **The Charge of the Light Brigade, Break, Break, Break, Tears Idle Tears, The Lady of Shallot** and the longer works **In Memoriam** and **Idylls of the King**. It can be proved beyond any doubt that he is a master of rhythm and of rich, descriptive imagery who had successfully created poems in a variety of poetic styles, that too encompassing a wide range of subject matter. It is quite well known that he had great affinity and love for the Victorian England and he had successfully manifested this beautifully through the different themes he had dealt with picturesquely in his myriad poems. Thus quite confidently it can be said that Alfred Lord Tennyson is unquestionably a great Victorian poet whose contribution to the realm of English poetry is truly immense and highly rich.



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