

Tennyson's Treatment of Dissimilar Concept of Life in his Two Mythical Poems –*Ulysses* and *The Lotos-Eaters*

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Abstract

Myths and legends have always been used in framing artistic structure of literary works. In this connection, Alfred Lord Tennyson's two mythical poems - "Ulysses" and "The Lotos-Eaters" present two contradictory states of human nature. In "Ulysses" the hero represents the mood of restlessness and action; on the other hand in "The Lotos-Eaters" the same hero along with his sailors are tired in life and willing to enjoy rest forgetting the weariness of past life. This paper is an attempt to explore 'action' and 'inaction' in the two pair poems - Ulysses and The Lotos-Eaters respectively. Further the paper focuses on the original myth of Ulysses and Tennyson's own treatment with the same to express the dissimilar concepts of human life for modern readers.

Keywords: Myths and Legends, mythical poems, mood of restlessness, 'action' and 'inaction' Ulysses, The Lotus-Eaters.

1. Introduction

The study of myth began from the very beginning of human civilization. Myth has continued to be an important source of raw materials for the poets and writers of all times. In the process of the development of English literature myth and legends play a significant role, especially in framing literary concepts and themes. However, modern approaches often view myths and legends as demonstration of social, cultural or psychological truths, rather than exact historical truth. Like many other English poets, Tennyson has also used myths and legends in some of his poetry; for example, "Tithonus", "Oenone", and "Ulysses" and so on. Such poems are directly based on classical myths. But, Tennyson's treatment of the classical myths in his composition are not like those of Hellenic Age. Tennyson draws the myths and legends and adopts them to express a mood of modern readers. His mythical characters represent the universal appeal, spirit and fashion of human soul. He maintains the originality of the mythical characters but skillfully blends them and sets the meaning with the modern thought.

Tennyson was a Victorian through and through (Stephen, 2000). As a representative of Victorian poets he has tried to create such mood and theme that have universal appeal, meaning and acceptance to the readers. In this regard, he has chosen such characters from classical myth which can express his deep idealism, spirit and philosophy. In Victorian period England achieved notable progress at material and intellectual level. It was an age alive with new activities. There was a revolution at commercial enterprise, due to the great

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increase of available markets resulting in an immense advance in the use of mechanical devices (Albert, 2000). Tennyson as a believer of advancement in all spheres of life, has recreated the character of Ulysses with the spirit of unbridled thirst for knowledge and search for newer world. Long (1909, p. 454) comments that “the Victorian Age is especially remarkable because of its rapid progress in all arts and sciences and mechanical inventions”.

Although many of Tennyson’s early poems were based on classical myths, this paper will focus on the messages and themes of two pair poems in particular – “Ulysses” and “The Lotos-Eaters”. In these two poems two different contrasting views on life have been depicted. In the poem “Ulysses” for example, the hero represents the spirit of enquiry, intellectual ferment and the expedition for knowledge in Victorian age. On the contrary, in “The Lotos-Eaters” a reverse view of life has been presented. Unlike “Ulysses”, here in Lotos Land the mariners promise not to sail anymore. They argue one after another in favor of a life of rest and inaction in the isolated land where there is no sign of pain and tension.

2. Literature Review

Using myths and legendary characters in literature is a common phenomenon for the writers and poets of all ages. Regarding myth and literature, Achebe (1975) remarks that art is and was always in service of man. Our ancestors created their myth and legends and told their stories for a human purpose. This remark implies that myth and legends were not only mere stories but they had similar human implications as well. Regarding the function of myth in literature, Peter (1974) points out that myth can mean ‘sacred story’, ‘traditional narrative’ or ‘tale of the gods’; a myth can also be a story to explain why something exists. In this respect the remark of Eliot (1965, p. 681) is worth mentioning: “It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.” Thus, the use of myth in literary works serves the human purposes and denotes various positive messages, warnings and themes to the readers.

Tennyson regenerated the figure of Ulysses (Ulysses is the Latin form of Greek name Odysseus), the hero of Homer’s *Odyssey* and the medieval hero of Dante’s *Inferno*. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, (*Scroll xii*) it is learnt from a prophecy that he has to go on a final voyage after killing the suitors of his wife, Penelope. He is the first of the Greek epic heroes to be renowned for brain and muscle. His mental and physical attributes are of equal importance in helping him to achieve his goals. His courage, wits and stability enable him to endure all his difficulties (Snodgrass, 2001). The details of the voyage of Ulysses are found in Dante’s *Inferno*, *Canto xxvi*. Ulysses tells, how, after his return to Ithaca, neither his love for his son nor for his wife or his kingdom could check his desire to set out on a sea voyage to gain experience and knowledge. As they approach the Pillars of Hercules, Ulysses urges his crew:

*'Brothers, I said, 'o you, who having crossed
a hundred thousand dangers, reach the west,
to this brief waking-time that still is left
unto your senses, you must not deny
experience of that which lies beyond
the sun, and of the world that is unpeopled.
Consider well the seed that gave you birth:
you were not made to live your lives as brutes,
but to be followers of worth and knowledge.'*

(Inferno, Canto XXVI, lines 112-120, Mandelbaum Translation)

Dante's hero Ulysses is a tragic figure. Though he returned to his homeland Ithaca, he found himself unhappy and restless and nothing could stop him from going to further adventure. He reassembled his old companions, sailed towards the west beyond the Pillars of Hercules and eventually a storm sank the ship and killed him with his sailors. However, Tennyson's Ulysses is full of spirit and enthusiasm and there is no sign of failure in his voyage. To sail to the west in one last adventure "stress[es] Ulysses' capacity for enthusiasm, but it also reinforces the impression of a restless wanderer and strongly implies that the enthusiasm is rather for self-gratification than for pursuing knowledge" (Pettigrew, 1963, pp. 27-45). Here the character of Ulysses has been marked more for self-gratification than for pursuing knowledge. On the contrary, Ratcliffe (2016) asserts that Ulysses crystallizes the poet's need to find a new version of faith to cope with anguish. Here the voyage of Ulysses has been distinguished as a journey of his faith towards unknown destination. However, Tennyson's "Ulysses" must not be read with such partial view. In this respect the comments of Findlay (1981, pp.139-149) is remarkable, "Ulysses is not a richly ambivalent poem, nor would one wish to reduce its meaning to one narrowly programmatic reading." Therefore, there is no scope of reading Tennyson's "Ulysses". simply focusing on the spirit and enthusiasm.

The poem "The Lotos-Eaters" is also based on the classical story of Ulysses (Odysseus). In Homer's *Odyssey* all the survivors of the Trojan war reach their homes safely with the exception of Ulysses and his fellow sailors. who wander and go through many torments in sea. In the course of their wanderings in sea (Book -9), they reach the magic island of Lotos-Eaters.

"He and his ships were driven across the sea for nine days. On the tenth they made the land of the Lotos-Eaters and put in there. But weary through they were and in need of refreshment they were to leave quickly. The inhabitants met them with kindness and gave them flower-food to eat, but those who tasted it, only a few fortunately, lost their longing for home. They wanted only to dwell in the Lotos Land, and let the memory of all that had been fade from their minds. Odysseus had to drug them on shipboard and chain them there. They wept, so great was their desire to stay, tasting forever the honey –sweet flowers" (Hamilton, 1963, p.258).

It is such an island where time remains inactive and all things always seem the same. In this dreamy island the mariners feel the lazy air and the heavy mist curling the hillside. The description of Lotus is found in the writing of Graves (1995). It is stated that the lotus is a stoneless, saffron-colored fruits about the size of a bean. The fruits grow in sweet and wholesome cluster. It has the property of making those who have tasted it lose all memory of their land.

In the poem “The Lotos-Eaters” Ulysses and his sailors came unto a land in which it always seemed afternoon. In such mysterious and strange atmosphere mild-eyed Lotos-Eaters come with branches full of fruits and flowers of magic Lotos. The hungry sailors taste the Lotos and fell into deep sleep. After that they sit on the yellow sand of the sea-shore and find the setting sun before them along with the rising moon behind. There they sing a choric song together and all associations lead their mind to rethink about the aim and meaning of life. In this regard, Markley (2004) opines that Tennyson was clearly attempting to write English poems with a modern relevance for an English audience. “The Lotos-Eaters” represents the danger of allowing oneself to be distracted and waylaid by sensual pleasure. Another argument has been pointed out by Fulweiler (1965) in which he says that to sail back to Ithaca, with the hopes of one day being reunited with home and family, means work and pain. This argument brings out the average family life avoiding tendency of the sailors. In this respect Kincaid (1969) posits that settling back into that life that they had left so long ago and readjusting to civilian existence would only “trouble joy” for the sailors. Staying on the island avoids all of that confusion and emotional pain, and releases the mariners from all forms of responsibility. In the Lotos Land the sailors will stay for hypothetical gains and the crew would rather focus on immediate pleasure. Maclaren (1961, p.262) coins the fact that the mariners sound extremely Epicurean in this text: “Convinced that they would become involved in struggles with evil if they should depart and seek to re-enter their familiar world, the sailors reject this course of action because it would give them no pleasure.” Thus, the island seems a paradise to the sailors free from the weariness of their past life.

3. “Ulysses”

The poem “Ulysses” was written in the first few weeks after the death of his bosom college friend, Arther Henry Hallam in 1833 and revised for publication in 1842. Tennyson’s Ulysses is an adaptation of the two classical characters –Homer’s Odysseus and Dante’s Ulysses. However, in this poem the character of Ulysses is somehow modeled as it is in Dante’s *Inferno*.

He represents the inner spirit of human soul – adventurous, curious and restlessness in nature. In this poem Ulysses argues in favor of his further adventure in sea. Ulysses has returned home in Ithaca after twenty years of wandering - in Trojan War and on sea. He speaks to are unidentified audience that he is unwilling to lead a lazy life. He thinks that such vegetable life in Ithaca is not for him. He is by nature adventurous and that there is no point in his staying home. He declares:

*It little profits that an idle king,
 By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
 Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole
 Unequal laws unto a savage race,
 That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.
 I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
 Life to the lees:* (L: 1 – 7)

He recalls his past life and finds that he has lived a stirring and adventurous life and gained experience and knowledge of men and things. But his temptation for knowledge and adventure is still fresh and there are many more places, things and experiences that are still untouched. In his calculation, human life is too short but knowledge is vast and unlimited. A single life is not enough to gain all knowledge. He has already spent much of his time and he has only few years left of his short life. Therefore, he makes up his mind to make the best use of every moment of remaining amount of time by following knowledge like a sinking star.

*Little remains: but every hour is saved
 From that eternal silence, something more,
 A bringer of new things; and vile it were
 For some three suns to store and hoard myself,
 And this gray spirit yearning in desire
 To follow knowledge like a sinking star,* (L: 26- 31)

He has no tension regarding his ordinary duties to his land as his son Telemachus is worthy enough to look after the state. His son would be quite happy to take the responsibility of ruling the land, while he would go for adventure in sea. He recalls that he along with his fellow sailors faced great dangers and difficulties in past. So he knows how to face the adverse situation in life. No doubt that now they have grown old and upcoming death would close all; but he firmly believes that still he can seek a newer world.

*Old age hath yet his honour and his toil,
 Death closes all but: something ere the end,
 Some work of noble note, may yet be done,* (L: 51- 53)

Here the tone and the messages may be compared with Robert Frost's famous poem, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", stated in the concluding line:

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
 But I have promises to keep,
 And miles to go before I sleep,
 And miles to go before I sleep.* (L: 13-16)

Ulysses declares that he is strong in will to sail towards the west even beyond the western horizon, 'to strive to seek, to find and not to yield'. Thus the whole poem is a journey towards a new adventure, knowledge and regeneration of the inner spirit of human. The poem of course provides various motivating messages and moral the courage to the modern readers. From religious and philosophical point of view, it transmits the nature of restlessness of human soul and its insatiable thirst to know the unknown. From realistic point of view the poem suggests that it is never too late to discover a new thing and a new world. It teaches that a person should never leave the hope of winning or standing again against the adverse realities of life. If someone is strong in will, then from any situation or at any age he can snatch his victory or stand again.

4. "The Lotos-Eaters"

The poem, "The Lotos-Eaters" is in striking contrast with the spirit of pair poem "Ulysses". In the course of the returning journey of Ulysses, he along with his crew reached to the Lotos Land in the afternoon. In the Lotos Land they find everything in isolation, in rest and free from weariness. In such atmosphere and stage of life they sing a choric song together and in their song they present various argument in favor of a life of inaction and lethargic in nature. However, the arguments of the sailors have deep philosophical meaning as they express some fact of human suffering and labor in the world. They ask why man, the best creation of God should suffer alone. They observe that all is maturing and going towards death silently and peacefully except human beings. Why is our life full of labor? Why are we the victims of cruel destination? The mariners revise questions about the valueless struggle of human life also.

*Why are we weigh'd upon with heaviness
And utterly consumed with sharp distress,
While all things else have rest from weariness?
All things have rest; why should we toil alone,
We only toil, who are the first of things.* (L: 57- 61)

They ask, if the death is the end of life, why would all life be full of valueless struggle and labor? They find that human life is too short and running fast towards death. Man dies in no time and they can take nothing from the world. Besides, after death they are forgotten soon.

*Death is the end of life; ah, why
Should life all labor be?
Let us alone.* [L: 86-88]

They remember their long journey of life, dead friends and terrible experiences. They think, perhaps the dead bodies of their fellow soldiers have been converted into dust. Besides, they left their families for long twenty years. In their absence their children must have taken over the responsibilities of their homes. So it would be unwise to go back and disturb them. They imagine the disorder and chaos of their homeland developed in their absence. Now they are old and their eye-sight is weak. They would not be able to play any

active role and bring order again there.

Let what is broken so remain.

The Gods are hard to reconcile:

'Tis hard to settle order once again

There is confusion worse than death,

Trouble on trouble, pain on pain,

(L: 125-129)

Therefore all the sailors decide to remain there on that island, eat Lotos, enjoy, rest and wait for death.

In the concluding lines the mariners change their tone and feel jealous of luxurious lifestyle of gods and goddesses who are indifferent to the miseries and sufferings of human beings. They drink the nectar, see the destruction of lands, crops and living beings including human beings but take no action. Man pray to gods but gods do nothing to save the humankind. Gods hear the painful cries but remain indifferent. At this stage, the tone of the sailors is pessimistic and they speak with contempt about Pagan gods and goddesses and criticize their inaction in the real crisis of human beings.

Finally, the sailors decide that they will wander no more, will stay at Lotos Land and enjoy rest in isolation because slumber is sweeter than toil. They further argue -

Surely, surely, slumber is more sweet than toil, the shore

Than labour in the deep mid-ocean, wind and wave and oar;

O, rest ye, brother mariners, we will not wander more.

(L: 174-177)

5. Comparative Analysis

In these two poems two different human ideologies have been expressed. Though Ulysses is the common hero in both of the poems, the readers hardly find any common characteristics of him. Here two characters represent two different spirits, thoughts, messages and moods. In "Ulysses" the hero is curious and adventurous, of human soul, while in "The Lotos-Eaters" the protagonist argues for the necessity of rest and contemplation for all moving and suffering souls. In both poems, the hero recalls the glorious past life and experiences; in "Ulysses" the hero is inspired by the past experiences and finds inspiration for further adventure. On the other hand in "The Lotos-Eaters" the protagonist is tired of his laborious and painful journey of life and hence wants to escape from that life. Another distinctive view of life is regarding the old age. In "Ulysses" the poet expresses that old age has his honour and toil and there is no time to seek a newer world; in contrast in "The Lotos-Eaters" it is expressed that old age is a period of rest. It cannot take the burden of new adventure and challenge. Further more, dissimilar philosophy of life is marked regarding the future course of action in two pair poems. In "Ulysses" the sailors prepare themselves to face the unpredictable dangers in life during their upcoming voyage in sea but in "The Lotos-Eaters" the crew dream and plan for a passive, calm and lethargic life in the isolated Lotos Land.

6. Conclusion

It is marked that in both the poems the protagonists are escapist, isolated and are trying to avoid the realities of regular human life. In "Ulysses", the hero has spent all his life in adventure and now he cannot adjust himself in his own land and longs for further journey ignoring his duty to his family, people and land. In "The Lotos-Eaters" the mariners are revolting against the spirit of life and ready to live in the dreamy land forgetting their actual duty towards family, land and people. Thus, it is observed that in both the poems the protagonist along with the crews is acting according to his will and ready to fulfill his interest. In fact, the characters are true to themselves but escapist to the rest of the world, to their people and to their family members. Thus, the character of Ulysses is the embodiment of two dissimilar states of human mind in the two poems. In "Ulysses" it is on automatic force of human soul which is by nature inquisitive and exploratory, while in "The Lotos-Eaters" it is the subconscious tendency of human soul searching for exemption from the duties of life and ready to embrace eternal peace in isolation.

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