



A CONTEMPLATIVE DIALOGUE BETWEEN DEATH AND IMMORTALITY IN TENNYSON'S POEMS

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ABSTRACT



Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) along with Robert Browning, Mathew Arnold is a representative poet of Victorian age. Generally it is notated that Victorian age in England began with the ascension of Queen Victoria to English throne in 1837 and it is sprawled up to 1901 ending with queen's death in the same year. Charles Dickens, with his realistic novel, crisp and straightforward narration and power of poetic craftsmanship pierced the hearts of his readers with his indelible philosophic thoughts and unending surprises of life and its nature of existence.

Religion in Victorian era frets with the struggle between doubt and faith as the publication of 'Origin of Species' in 1857 questioned the authority of the Bible with its evolutionary theory. Darwin propounded that the creation is under the process of constant evolution where Bible in its first chapter "Genesis" clearly states that Adam and Eve, the first man and woman created by God. Faith, hope, immanent loss, philosophic contemplation, death, immortality, nobility of kingship, medieval chivalry are the major themes chiselled out in Tennyson's poems.

My paper journeys through various poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson to pluck the meditative thoughts on death and sense of immortality which we can find at the root of every philosophical discourse.

Keywords: *Death, Immortality, Medieval Chivalry, Elegy, Existential Dilemma.*

Citation:

APA Sandhya,A.(2017) A Contemplative Dialogue Between Death and Immortality in Tennyson's Poems. *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature-JOELL*, 4(4), 163-165.

MLA Sandhya,A. "A Contemplative Dialogue Between Death and Immortality in Tennyson's Poems." *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature JOELL*, Vol.4, no.4, 2017, pp.163-165.

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Alfred Tennyson's poetic works represent varied hues in their existence like flowers in a garden. He wrote lyrics, Elegies, blank verse stanzas and tried his pen as a playwright also. As many themes flow from his pen and poetic horizon, the underlying philosophy is concealed to life in its myriad expressions. Since ages man is struggling to find out the solution to unsolvable questions of death and immortality, he doled off between religion and superstition, hope and despair, success and failure, yet the struggle continues.

We can find a straight answer to the question of immortality in Tennyson's poem *Tithonus*. According to Greek mythology 'Tithonus' is a Trojan prince and lover of Eos; he was blessed with eternal life. He lived eternally but that life is not a boon for an insurmountable bane for him. After passing from youth to old age which is inescapable passage for him, his life and immortality become a burden on him.

Tithonus says "The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,/The vapours weep their burdened to the ground/Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath/and after many a summer dies the swan/Me, only cruel immortality /consumes...

Tithonus laments his life; his pain intensifies when he compares his life with that of woods. They decay and fall, man comes tills the land goes off. The change is celebrated in the poem. Changelessness and Deathlessness are putrid gifts Tithonus received.

Christopher Marlow's "Doctor Faustus" is also a play on the theme of death and eternal life in hell. Faustus exclaims in Act V, Scene 2, "All Beasts are happy, for when they die, their souls are soon dissolved in elements", becoming nothing is the cause of being happy. David Daiches places "Tithonus" on the plain of personal loss. Tithonus regrets the loss of youth and his dismantling body. Pain and suffering continues without any respite in sight. Like "Ulysses" he could not drink the life to the lees.

Tithonus had to say "To here me? Let me go; take back the gift:..

The gift, if it becomes no longer enjoyable it becomes a burden, it turns into a curse, the gift of immortality is the curse of an abating pain of continually evading death.

Crossing the Bar is an elegiac poem. An elegiac poem mourns the personal loss of life. Tennyson here shows the creation as flow of river of life as continuous one but the life has to cross the bar, the bar of death to enter or to return to bottomless ocean of endlessness. Death here is compared with just crossing the bar and he says

"I hope to see my pilot face to face/When I have crost the bar".. but he wishes.. "And may there be no sadness of farewell,/when I embark"..

Tennyson wishes that nothing shall sound sad when he embarks on the journey of crossing the bar. He shows the impending sorrow highlighting the thought that death is not at all the reason for someone to feel sad.

Bible says " Where, O, death, is your victory?, where, O death, is your sting (1Corinthians 15:55 KJV).

In his holy sonnets 'John Donne' questions the dread of death under the title of the poem "Death Be not Proud", he says 'Though art slave to fate, chance, kings and desperate men/ And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell..

Death enslaves cowardice and who overcomes the pangs of cowardice has already conquered the death. Who don't fear death, where is death for them? Comparing the 'Crossing the Bar' with 'Death Be not Proud' the former is silent, meditatively overcoming the ennui of death.

'Charge of the Light Brigade' is the poem which was written on the occasion of the huge losses suffered by the British army in the battle of Balaclava during the time of Crimean war. Tennyson upheld and glorified the sacrifice which is rather blind on its part with his poetic talent. He contemplates "Half a league, half a league,/Half a league onward,/All in the valley of Death/Rode in the valley of Death/Rode the six hundred"...The sacrifice, the courage which even though does not yield any result it is accepted as noble sacrifice because it tasted death welcoming it valiantly. Tennyson further beautifies his poem by contemplating.."Canon to right of them/Canon to left of them/Canon in front of them/Valley'd and thundered".. The brave tastes death sweet the hesitant make it sour. Honour in death is a welcome sign for Tennyson to cross the Bar at last.



'In Memoriam A.H.H' is a world renowned poem written mourning the loss of his friend Arthur Henry Hallam. This is the poem of faith and doubt, this is the poem of death and immortality, and this is the poem of benevolent God and cruel nature.

The impermanence of existence is highlighted in the following stanza

"The hills are shadows, and they flow/From form to form, and nothing stands;/They melt like mist, the solid lands/Like clouds they shape themselves and go" ..

The mighty and the meek everything like hills shall change form to form and nothing stands as it is permanently. Welcoming change is respecting the creation and the creator. If death is there, if mutability is ever present, if the struggle between hope and despair is raging in the heart, the loss of self and loss of near ones marauding the health, what shall we do? Shall we lament? Shall we feel bereft any power to wield our own ways to survive? Shall we become restless spirits? The answer is given by Tennyson in the following stanza from the poem "In Memoriam"

He says, " Ring out the old, ring in the new/Ring, happy bells across the snow/The year is going, let him go/Ring out the false, ring in the true.." The old must give way to new, the change is welcome, it reminds us of all embracing love not particularised on any one thing or on one aspect of existence. One shall feel happy in welcoming the new, in bidding the farewell to old.

CONCLUSION

The change is the permanent thing we can observe in creation. We come and we go none stays here forever. Death is not the finality in itself it takes us to the station from where we have come. Hope is there in the Tennyson's philosophy of death and immortality when he says..

"Ring in the valiant man and free/ The larger heart, the kindlier hand/Ring out the darkness of the land/Ring in the Christ that is to be" . The hope is not dead, it cannot die in Tennyson's poems, it persuades us to life the life to its fullest extent as Ulysses did..

"I cannot rest from travel: I will drink/Life to the lees: All times I have enjoyed/Greatly, Have suffer'd greatly, both with those/ That loved men, and alone, on shore..."

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