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# **The Quest for Knowledge in Selected poems of Alfred, Lord Tennyson**

A paper

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**To All Students of English  
Literature with our Love**

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## **Abstract**

The theme of the quest for knowledge played an important role in the poetry of the most leading Victorian poet, Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892). For Tennyson, the quest for knowledge was the only way to achieve higher goals.

This paper, therefore, traces the theme of the quest for knowledge, which is clearly revealed in his well-known poems: "Locksley Hall" and "Ulysses".

Section one deals with the Victorian Age and life and career of Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

Section two deals with the quest for knowledge in Tennyson's most popular poems: "Locksley Hall" and "Ulysses".

The conclusion sums up the findings of the whole study

# Table of Contents

Heading	Page
Acknowledgments .....	ii
Abstract .....	iii
Section one: Tennyson and the Victorian Age .....	1
Notes .....	5
Section two: The Theme of Loss in Selected Poems of Tennyson Analytical Study .....	6
Notes .....	11
Conclusion .....	13
Bibliography .....	14

## Section –One –

### Life and Career of Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Tennyson was born on August 6, 1809, in Lincolnshire, the county of which he has painted the inland scenery in *The May Queen* and the coastland in *Locksley Hall*. His Father was Rector of Somersby, a tiny village between spilsby and Horn castle , set among orchards and deep lanes and large spreading fields that carry the eye upward to the gray hills around.<sup>1</sup>

It was here that he spent all his early life, playing by the river side, reading voluminously , thrilling his brother's and sisters with stories of romance , and writing , as surely no child ever wrote before, Of course , the style was copied from the poet who happened to be his hero at the moment , Thomson at eight, pope at eleven ; then then, at fourteen, a blank verse drama modeled on Byron; but , apart from this extraordinary facility , the technical skill of these boyish works satisfied even the exacting taste of his later life 'I have some of them still by me' ; he said in 1890,' and they seem to me in perfect meter'<sup>2</sup>

From 1817 to 1820 he was at school at louth . On his return he worked for eight years with his father, a classical scholar of considerable learning and great poetic attainments, and in 1828 he entered, with his brother Charles, at Trinity College, Cambridge. His university career was remarkable, not so much from his winning the prize for his poem Timbuc too – the last reward and almost the last topic which we should readily associate with his name – as for the number and value of the friend ships which he formed.

He was intimate with such eminent figures as speeding, Milne's, Trench, Brookfield, Alford, Arthur Hallam, Merivale; these were some of the men who filled his rooms. It was no small thing to take the lead of such a society, and to hold it with simple unaffected singleness of heart.

"Then as always his modesty shrank from every Form of public display, and even when he gained his academic honour he asked Merivale to recite at the senate house the poem which he was too shy to deliver in person".<sup>3</sup>

He added two events to the quiet record of his life, he was married to Miss Sellwood; he accepted the Laureateship, recently vacated by the death of Wordsworth. The first fruits, of his new office were the stately dedication to the Queen, written in 1851, and the ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington, which followed in the next Year, In 1855 he published *Maud*, at the time the most severely criticised of all his writings; and shortly afterwards began that series of epic romances in which he has retold the stories of the Arthurian cycle.<sup>4</sup>

Tennyson is one of the most popular of English poets, and the charm of his poetry, is the charm of the poet's personality. At the base of all Tennyson's teachings, indeed of all his works, is Tennyson the man. A poet's poetry is cast in the mould of his thoughts, and for a proper understanding of his works it's essential to understand his ideals and beliefs, the views and opinions, which inspired him in life, and which determine the tone of his poetry.

A strain of morbid melancholy ran in the Family, Tennyson himself had this melancholy, and it accounts for much of his strength and weakness as a poet. "It explains the strange querulousness that marks many of his poems dealing with religious subjects; it explains the constant harping on theological difficulties, the pessimistic note that, the first Locksley Hall notwithstanding, rings through most of his social utterances; it explains also the very large proportion of poems expressing ever varying shades of wistful meditation and regret".<sup>5</sup>

Along with this strain of melancholy was a strain of elemental vigour, inherent also in the rural stock from which he sprang. This characteristic, though familiar enough to Tennyson's Friends, is less discernible in his writings, since he has not given it full expression in his poetry. But unless we remember it we shall not find it easy to understand how the man who wrote the sentimental Idylls, and chiselled with such laborious art and severe restraint the verse of *In Memoriam*, wrote also *The Northern Farmer*, *The Cobbler*, and *Rizpah*.

No better all-around picture of Tennyson has ever been drawn than by Carlyle, whose genius for literary portrait painting, despite humorous exaggerations was unsurpassed "A man solitary and sad, as certain men are, dwelling in an element of gloom, carrying about him,

which he is manufacturing into cosmos. One of the finest looking men in world - a great shock of rough, dusky dark hair; bright, laughing, hazel eyes; massive aquiline face, most yet most delicate; of sallow, brown - complexion, almost Indian looking; clothes cynically loose, free - and - easy, smokes infinite tobacco. His voice is musical, metallic, fit for loud laughter and piercing wail, and all that may lie between speech and speculation, free and plenteous; I do not meet in these late decades such company over a pipe! We shall see what he shall grow to. "Again, to his brother John Carlyle sent the following account of Tennyson : " A fine large - Featured dim - eyed, bronze - coloured, shaggy - headed man is Alfred; dusky, smoky, Free and easy : who swims outwardly and inwardly with great composure, in an articulate element as of tranquil chaos and tobacco smoke; great now and then when he does emerge; a most restful, brotherly, solid hearted man.<sup>6</sup>

Another main characteristic of Tennyson is simplicity. He was a man of simple habits and simple manners. His way of life was simple. The emotions that he appeals to are generally easy to understand and common to all. He avoids the subtle analysis of character, and the painting of complex motives or of the wild excesses of passion. The moral laws which he so strongly upholds are those primary sanctions upon which average English society is founded. A certain puritan simplicity and a scholarly restraint pervade the mass of his work.

It was at Cambridge that he first began to speak in poetry with his own voice. Before going up he had published, conjointly with Charles Tennyson, a volume entitled poems by *Two Brothers*, but these are mere echoes of his Byron - worship. The volume of 1830 brings out of its treasure house things new as well as old. The songs, the love - poems, are still of little account. But in *Mariana*, in the *ode to memory* and in *Recollections of the Arabian Nights*. He already in dictates his power of pictorial description; in the poet he gives a noble confession of the faith from which he never afterwards departed, and on every page he sounds a note, faint but unmistakable, of the matches melody which sings in all his later verse.<sup>7</sup>

In 1831 he left Cambridge, and in 1832 Came the year of Reform, big with graver issues than England had known since the Napoleonic wars. There can be no doubt that Tennyson was profoundly affected by the



awakening spirit of the time, and especially by a distrust of that growing individualism which the extremists then upheld as an ideal. "The more serious tone which overspread his life was further deepened by personal bereavement. His father's death in 1831 was followed in 1833 by that of Arthur Hallam, the dearest and most intimate of his friends: there is little wonder that amid private sorrow and public concern, his poetry should strike a note more earnest and more pathetic".<sup>8</sup>

The next volumes of poetry appeared in 1833 and 1842 respectively. The two volumes displays ascertain similarity of topic and treatment, and the later volume contains revised versions of a number of poems, printed in the earlier volume.

Among similarities we have first the classical poems – Oenone and The lotos – eaters in the one, Ulysses in the other; second, the English idyllic poems – *the may Queen and The miller's daughter* balanced by *Dora, The Gardener's Daughter*, and *Audley court*: and third, the symbolic poems, in which Tennyson first employed his eloquence for the direct *in culcation* of moral truth; as in the *palace of Art* (1833) and *The vision of sin* (1842).

In 1845 Tennyson received his first official recognition – a pension, from the civilist, off 200 a year, It is said that sir Robert peel, who was then premier, hesitated between the poet and Sheridan Knowles, of neither of whom had he ever read a line, and that his decision was determined by Mochton Milne's, after wards lord Houghton, who converted him with a copy of Ulysses. It is also said that Lord Houghton was stimulated to his missionary effort by Carlyle, who , ever since the volume of 1842, had become one of Tennyson's warmest and most cordial admirers. "The two had little in common beyond their vivid imagination and their uncompromising love of truth; they differed almost as widely in opinion as they differed in style; but their grounds of resemblance were enough for a deep – based mutual respect, and for an intimacy which lasted through life." Among Tennyson's other friends of this time may be mentioned Rogers, Audrey devere, Dickens, Thackeray, the Browning, and above all *FitzGerald*, a comrade for whose work he had a high regard, and to whose suggestions and criticisms he attached great Value.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Anthony Burgess, English Literature, (London: Longman Group LTD, 1958, p.11.

<sup>2</sup>William Vaughn Moody and Robert Morss Lovett, A History of English Literature, (Boston: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), p.4.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p5.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Burgess, p.15

<sup>6</sup>George Levin (ed.) The Emergence of Victorian Consciousness: The Spirit of the Age, (New York: Macmillan, 1967), pp.64-65.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Walter. E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870, (London: Yale university Press, 1957), p.1.

## Section –Two –

### The Quest for knowledge in Selected Poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson

Tennyson's poetry is not only connected with the problem of art and artist, or with love, but also with Knowledge and the quest for an earnest living and lofty ideal. Tennyson himself believed deeply in the progress of knowledge, which had a considerable currency during the Victorian period.<sup>1</sup> the belief in the progress of knowledge, is another prominent theme in the poetry of Tennyson who believed that knowledge must be associated with faith in God who is the source of all knowledge. This kind of belief finds the fullest expression in the "prologue" of *In Memoriam*, as these lines show:

We have but faith; we cannot know,  
For knowledge is of things we see;  
And yet we trust it comes from thee,  
Abeam in darkness let it grow.

Let knowledge grow from more to more,  
But more of reverence in us dwell;  
That mind and soul according well,  
May make one music as before

(Lines: 21 – 28)

In "Locksley Hall" (1842), Tennyson makes it clear that "as the cycle of history evolves, man keeps striving to attain progress; to grow every day better and brighter in every possible aspect of life"<sup>2</sup>

I doubt not through the ages one increasing purpose runs  
And the thoughts of man are widened with the process of suns.

(Lines: 137 – 138)

This desire for knowledge finds the fullest expression in Tennyson's most popular poem, *Ulysses* (1842). To a large extent, Tennyson's *Ulysses* resembles Dante's than Homer's *Ulysses*.<sup>3</sup> In Homer's *Odyssey* and Dante's *Inferno*; *Ulysses* had taken different roles and was applied to different functions. In this concern, Jordan observes that

In the *Odyssey* XI, 100 – 173, the seer Tiresias prophesies that after *Ulysses*' return he will go forth again, but will die possibly far from the sea, "a death so gentle, that shall lay thee low when thou art overcome with sleek old age, and they people shall dwell in prosperity around thee'. Tennyson's *Ulysses* refuses that sleek and gentle death, leaving the prosperity to the care of his son Telemachus. In Dante's *Inferno* XXVI, 90 – 124, *Ulysses* speaks from the circle of hell reserved for those who have given bad counsel. He had not returned at all to crown Penelope with joy, or to be a good father, but had gone right on " To explore the world, and search the ways of life, man's evil and his virtue "<sup>4</sup>.

Tennyson's *Ulysses* ', on the other hand, is not the hero of a classical past, but the restless, perplexed wanderer of Victorian England.<sup>5</sup> Thus, we come to conclude that *Ulysses* stands for the restless soul of Tennyson himself. The poet had always looked to the past searching for new themes and symbols that suit his principles and ideals, but the retreat to the past, as Royal's remarks, "has become for Tennyson not only a means of escape but also a means but also a means by which to find value for himself in his own time."<sup>6</sup> Hallam Tennyson reports his father, saying : "Ulysses was written soon after Arthur Hallam's death [ Tennyson's dearest friend], and gave my feeling about the need of going forward, and braving the struggle of life "<sup>49</sup>

The poem is a dramatic monologue divided into three parts: lines 1-32 present Ulysses in soliloquy; lines 33-43, his fare well to his people and lines 44 to the end, his exhortation to his mariners. In first part, we find Ulysses, now an old man, at his homeland (Ithaca) complaining about his boring life there. He thinks that it is useless to stay "Among these barren crags, I matched with an aged wife" (line: 2-3) and rule "a savage race, I That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me" (line : 4-5) . In spite of old age, he still has an appetite to travel with those who loved him and suffered with him.

I cannot rest from travel, I will drink  
Life to the lees. All times I have enjoy'd  
Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those  
That loved me, and alone; on shore, and when  
Thro' scudding drifts the rainy Hyades vexed the dim sea.  
(lines : 6-11)

"Much have I seen and known - cities of men land manners, climates, councils, governments "(lines: 13 -14) says Ulysses; yet he wants to experience" that untraveled world whose margin fades / forever and forever when I move" (line: 21 – 22) .Moreover, his grey spirit is

... Yearning in desire  
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,  
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.  
( line : 30 – 32)

In the second part, Ulysses introduces his son, Telemachus, who will be responsible for Ithaca after his departure.

Ulysses has given his son the task to civilize his people. It seems that the father and son have chosen different ways in life.

Ulysses, the heroic soul, has chosen to seek knowledge and a new kind of experience while his son, the opposite of his father, will remain in the island and do his common duties, "when I am gone. He works his work, I mine". (line:43)

In the last part, Ulysses urges his old mariners to come to his mysterious voyage because he thinks "Tis not too late to seek a newer world" (line : 58) . He believes that " Death closes all " , but " some work of noble note, may yet be done" (line: 53). His

... Purpose holds

To sail beyond the sunset , and the baths

of all the western stars, unit I die.

( line : 59 – 61)

This is the last sea voyage for Ulysses and his old comrades to the unknown world, Ryals points out: "This is the symbolic sea voyage in quest of new voyage to death which is the only experience possible for old men".<sup>8</sup>

This interpretation is doubtful because Ulysses, thought old and weak, has a very strong will , he still wishes to explore a new world.

Tho'h much is taken, much abides; and tho'h

Weare not now that strength which in old days .....

Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will

To strive , to seek, to find, and not to yield.

( lines : 65 – 88)

Thus, the sea is seen as a wide mysterious world where men strive to explore more knowledge, secrets and new experiences. Ulysses is not certain of what he will find in his sea mysterious voyage; yet he resolves to sail, braving the dangers he might meet.

The never – ending quest for knowledge manifests itself clearly in another poem, entitled “ The voyage” (1864). This poem is an allegory of the quest for a lofty ideal , “ never to be attained, but never to be abandoned.”<sup>9</sup> The poem opens with a group of mariners who left the harbor behind and sailed with happy hearts for the south

We left behind the painted buoy  
That losses at the harbour – mouth;  
And madly danced our hearts with joy,  
As fast we fled to the south.

(lines: 1-4)

“we knew the merry world was round , / And we might sail for ever more” (line: 7-8), say the mariners as they were sailing into “ the bro/ad seas” when they “ passed long lines of Northern capes/And dewy Northern meadows green” ( line:35-36), they “ came to warmer waves” and drove “ across the boundless East” .As they were sailing across “hundred shores of happy climes” , the mariners never stopped for rest nor entertainment.

O hundred shores of happy climes,  
How swiftly stream’ dye by the bark!  
At times the whole sea burned , at times  
With wakes of fire we tore the dark’ .....  
But we nor paused for fruit nor flowers.

( lines : 49 – 56)

It seems that the mariners took their decision to follow knowledge, identified as a “one fair vision”, and never to have rest from toil in “The houseless ocean’s having field” (line: 30). Here, Tennyson “developed a characteristic metaphor to describe the tireless struggle of his aspiring age: life was a sea journey over troubled waters, a pilgrimage which demanded for titude spirit and steadfast defiance of the laws that seemed to condition man’s ineluctable free will”.<sup>10</sup>

For one fair vision ever fled  
Down the waste waters day and night  
And still we followed where she led,  
In hope to gain upon her flight.

(line:57 – 60)

At the end of the poem, the mariners confirmed their resolution to sail in pursuit of “one fair vision”. They never furled their sails, nor dropped their anchors for rest.

Instead they went on sailing and defied the laws of nature.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Areej M. Jwaad Al-Khafaji, "Progress and Decadence in Tennyson's Poetry", (Baghdad: Baghdad University, unpublished M. A Thesis, 1997), p, viii.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p2.

<sup>3</sup>W. B. Stanford, **The Ulysses Theme: A study in the Adaptability of a traditional Hero**, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), p. 204.

<sup>4</sup>Elian Jordan, , **Alfred Tennyson**, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup>Clyde de Ryals, **Themes and Symbols in Tennyson's Poems to 1850**, (Philadephia: University of Pennsylvania, 1964), p. 126.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Hallam Lord Tennyson, **Alfred Lord Tennyson, A Memoir**, (London: Macmillan Co. Ltd, 1987), Vol 1, p. 196.

<sup>8</sup>Ryals, p. 128.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Jerom Hamilton Buckley, **The Victorian Temper: A study in Literary Culture**, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 88.

## Conclusion

Tennyson's most prominent poems deal with the quest for knowledge and a lofty ideal. Tennyson himself believed deeply in the progress of knowledge, which had a considerable currency during the Victorian period. He believes that the progress in knowledge should be connected with faith in God who is the source of all knowledge. This progress should also bring a lot of reverence to human being and not humiliate them.

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