

Traits of Romanticism in Tennyson's Poetry

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Abstract

There is an element of Romanticism in all the poets, major or minor, of Victorian era, which followed the Romantic period. Lord Alfred Tennyson, the great poet of the Victorian England is no exception. The present paper is an endeavor to trace the romantic elements in the poetic works of this great representative poet. In the first section of the article I have incorporated a brief discussion about Romanticism, which upholds the fact that Romanticism is a literary movement of the early 19th century which includes some common characteristics like stress on subjectivity, emotion or imagination over reason, treatment of nature, passion for past, longing for something permanent and ideal. The second portion, which is the main part of the article, probes into some of the poems by Tennyson with a view to tracing romantic elements in them simultaneously quoting frequently from Dhirendranath Ghosh's article 'Romanticism'. The paper shows that Tennyson would have been a great Romantic instead of becoming the most representative poet of the Victorian era had he been born a century earlier as many basic traits of Romanticism like subjective treatment of myths and legend, a sense of dissatisfaction with the real world, longing to escape in a world of ideal completeness, passion for the past, treatment of nature are recurrent in his poetry.

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To find a definite answer to the simple question frequently raised in the discussion of Romanticism or in connection with Romanticism—'What is that particular something the presence of which, in poetry or in any other forms of art-expressions, may be said to constitute Romanticism?'— is difficult, because the term 'Romanticism' cannot be identified with a single style, technique, or attitude. Many critics, for a long time, have contributed to the obscurity of the term by their indirect methods of approach to the subject. The problem of finding an inclusive definition of Romanticism is also steered by the fact that it, which hardly deals with the subject matter of literature, is an attitude or particular approach determined by not a single trait but some common characteristics.

Romanticism is commonly defined as a style in literature or art characterized by a highly imaginative and subjective approach, emotional intensity, and a dreamlike or visionary quality. It is generally considered as an artistic and intellectual movement that originated in the late 18th century and underlined the necessity of strong emotion, imagination, freedom from classical correctness in art forms, and rebellion against social conventions. Romanticism emerged as a response to Classicism and also to some extent as a reaction against the Enlightenment and against 18th-century rationalism and physical materialism in general. Romanticism as a movement concentrated steadily on the individual, the subjective, the irrational, the imaginative, the personal, the spontaneous, the emotional, the visionary, and the transcendental.

Starting in the mid-18th century Romanticism reached its pinnacle in the 19th century. The epoch of Romanticism focused on the commonality of humankind and, while using emotion and nature, the poets and their works shed light on man's universal natures. Romanticism as a movement declined in the late 19th century and early 20th century with the growing dominance of Realism in literature and the rapid advancement of science and technology.

Romanticism basically dealt with three attitudes: Nature, the past, and the inner world of human nature. Although the early Romantic writers varied widely in the forms that they chose, these certain subjects were characteristics or Romantic attitudes.

Thus, we see, Romanticism is "a sweeping but indispensable modern term applied to the profound shift in Western attitudes to art and human creativity that dominated much of European culture in the first half of the 19th century, and that has shaped most subsequent developments in literature even those reacting against it. In its most coherent early form, as it emerged in the 1790s in Germany and Britain, and in the 1820s in France and elsewhere, it is known as the Romantic Movement or Romantic Revival [like "Gothic"—reflecting a return to old, old stuff—of the Goths or myths of Rome]. Its chief emphasis was upon freedom of individual self-expression: sincerity, spontaneity, and originality became the new standards in literature, replacing the decorous imitation of classical models favoured by 18th-century neo-classicism. Rejecting the ordered rationality of the Enlightenment as mechanical, impersonal, and artificial, the Romantics turned to the emotional directness of personal experience and to the boundlessness of individual imagination and aspiration. Increasingly independent of the declining system of aristocratic patronage, they saw themselves as free spirits expressing their own imaginative truths; several found admirers ready to hero-worship the artist as a genius or prophet. The restrained balance valued in 18th century culture was abandoned in favour of emotional intensity, often taken to extremes of raptures, nostalgia (for childhood or the past), horror, melancholy, or sentimentality. ...almost all showed a new interest in the irrational realms of dream and delirium or of folk superstition and legend. The creative imagination occupied the center of Romantic views of art, which replaced the 'mechanical' rules of conventional form with an 'organic' principle of natural growth and free development."⁽¹⁾

In this paper I will direct my efforts in tracing traits of romanticism in Lord Alfred Tennyson, the great representative poet of the Victorian era, and as I will do so I will frequently quote Dhirendranath Ghosh's essay 'Romanticism' as his understanding of Romanticism appeared to me comprehensive and all inclusive.

Lord Alfred Tennyson, regraded as the most representative poet of Victorian era and a consummate poetic artist, consolidated and refined the tradition bequeathed to him by his predecessors in the Romantic Movement (especially Wordsworth, Byron, Keats, Shelley). Beginning in the aftermath of Romantic Movement, Tennyson's development as a poet is a romantic progression from introverted and inert states of mind towards emancipated consciousness. His poetic sensibility is characterized by a dexterous conglomeration of Romanticism and Victorianism. In his poetry we get the aesthetic juxtaposition of these two elements in a way peculiarly of his own.

D.J. Palmer writes in his essay 'Tennyson's Romantic Heritage' "The growth of consciousness, and the relationship between the self and the world beyond, are fundamental concerns of romantic poetry and poetic theory. The aesthetic implications of this self-realization are seen in the characteristically symbolic modes of Romantic poetry: in the sensuous imagery, which embodies states of feeling rather than being purely descriptive, in the subjective use of mythological fable, and in the adoption of dramatic persona. Tennyson employs each of these modes of self-expression."⁽²⁾

He also points out, "most of the poems in 1830 volume are mood-paintings, and word pictures of highly sensitized, delicately attuned, febrile sensibility." The subject of the poem "Mariana" is drawn from Shakespeare's play *Measure for Measure*, 'Mariana in the moated grange'. The line describes a young woman waiting for her lover, who has abandoned her upon the loss of her dowry; "but Tennyson is not

concerned with the love story. Like Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, and more so, it is a poem in which 'the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feelings.' The characteristically romantic fusion of feeling with perception makes the silent-decaying house and its desolate landscape an embodiment of Mariana's consciousness, in a series of stanzas without any progression or resolution, this itself adding to the effect of monotony and stagnation."⁽³⁾

The Romantics were overtly tragic in their attitude to life. In this regard they stand quite opposite to the classical poets who glorified life in a flamboyant fashion in their poetic works. Dhirendranath Ghosh writes, "In Classic art, life is glorified and made beautiful and holy and something that in itself possesses 'a supreme value over and above all other things.' But the Romantic poet regards life 'as false nature', he is chained down to life by 'a heavy weight of hours.' To the Classic poet, contemplation of the sufferings and woes of life only serves to add to the value and beauty of life But the Romantic poet contemplates life only to be crushed under 'the heavy and weary weight of this unintelligible world', and instead of rising to the height of his argument and 'justify the ways of God to man' all his soul is aflame with 'a devotion to something afar, from the sphere of our sorrow.'"⁽⁴⁾ Tennyson, unlike the Classic poet, sees life in this world as a burdensome and wearisome existence. The mariners of his "The Lotos Eaters" contemplate over life as being crushed under heavy and weary toil:

"Death is the end of life; ah, why
Should life all labour be?"

And thus being weary with life full of toil and 'war with evil' they urge:

"Give us long rest or death, dark death or dreadful ease."

In this line we get a touch of Keatsian echo. The above quoted line from Tennyson's "The Lotos Eaters" seems to have a direct connection with

the following line occurring in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" :

"..... for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death."

Dhirendranath Ghosh writes, "A sense of dissatisfaction, then, with the real world, often leading to a desire to escape from that world, constitutes the very essence of Romanticism. Hence, it has two distinct but correlated aspects. There is in the first place, a vehement protest against the actualities of existence; and in the second place, a yearning for some completer synthesis, where the actualities of life will lose their edges and will not grate upon the senses and the feelings. It is thus, both an emphatic denial and a bold affirmation that constitutes the peculiar fascination, which Romanticism exerts over the susceptible mind." (5)

Thus, Romanticism has been found in the continuous search for avenues of escape from the world of facts. It is, on the one hand, reactionary against the grim and harsh realities of life; and on the other, imaginative and creative. Tennyson shows his romantic sensibility through his romantic rebellion against the harsh facts of life and creation of visionary worlds in his poems. The poem "The Lotos Eaters" is not only about Lotos island, it is a product of the Lotos Land of Tennyson's mythological imagination, which is essentially creative too. The most notable feature of this land of the lotos-eaters is its timelessness. It is "a land/In which it seem always afternoon", "A land where all things always seemed the same". Time stands still and change and transience are unknown. The landscape of the Lotos land offers a seductive and tempting vision of life free from toils and hardship. The landscape delineated expresses a sensuous weariness and longing for respite from all activity and hardship:

"There is sweet music here that softer falls
Than petals from blown roses on the grass,
Or night dews on still waters between walls

Of shadowy granite, in a gleaming pass;
 Music that gentler on the spirit lies,
 Than tir'd eyelids upon tir' eyes;
 Music that brings sweet sleep down from the blissful skies.
 Here are cool mosses deep,
 And thro' the moss the ivies creep,
 And in the stream the long-leaved flowers weep,
 And from the craggy ledge the poppy hangs in sleep."

The Lotos Land bears much resemblance with the ideal world of Keats as described in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" or "Ode to a Nightingale". This static existence is carefully set in sharp contrast to the ceaseless motion of the sea—"the wandering fields of barren foam" on which Ulysses along with his mariners is on a ceaseless and wearing journey. The sea then represents a temporal existence and also the harsh facts of the world that assail and overthrow the equilibriums of life, from which the lotos fruits offer escape into "dreamful ease". As a realm beyond the reach of time, the land of the lotos eaters depicts an imaginative ideal.

Again, Romanticism is an expression of the individual and of the needs of the individual. Tennyson, in this regard, is a romantic as he subjectively uses the myths and legends to give vent to his personal feelings, and also to cover mental pessimism and Victorian optimism. In some of his great poems like "Ulysses", "The Lotos Eaters", "Tithonus", "Oenone", "Morte D'Arther" Tennyson has rendered the myths and legends a very new look just to show these poems adjust with the crises of his time. In these poems Tennyson has superbly interlinked the myths and legends with his own sorrows or dejection and the optimism of his age due to modern inventions, new explorations and advancement of trades and commerce. Tennyson's "Ulysses", ostensibly about the undaunted spirit for adventure of the great mythic hero Ulysses, is actually about the poet's sense of loss and it expresses some of his deepest feelings. In "Tithonus" in the

mythic figure of Tithonus, caught in gnawing and frightful immortality, the poet is searching for consolation for the loss he has suffered after the death of Arthur Henry Hallam. In the ever-ageing figure of Tithonus the poet depicts the futility of eternal youth.

The theme of escape from the harsh reality of life, which occurs frequently in Tennyson, is treated with greater depth and subtlety in "The Lotos Eaters". The subject draws again on Homer's *Odyssey* in which Odysseus and his followers suffer years of hardship to reach Ithaca. In the land of lotos-eaters some of the sailors eat the lotos and lose all desire of return. The 'Choric Song' delineating the exquisite landscape offers almost irresistible allurements to live a carefree life of sensuous weariness and soporific dreaminess uninterrupted by toilsome activities and harsh facts of reality.

Passion and fascination for the past is an integral part of Romanticism and a longing for the "lost and gone" is the distinctive Tennysonian note. The quality for Tennyson most distressingly characterizes the present in its emptiness. "To me", Tennyson once wrote to Emily Sellwood, "The far-off world seems nearer than the present, for in the present is always something unreal and indistinct, but the other seems a good solid planet, rolling round its green hills and paradises to harmony of more steadfast laws."⁽⁶⁾ Whereas the present seemed to Tennyson empty and unreal, the past was a world of plenitude of stability. In "Ulysses" and "Tithonus" Tennyson dramatizes the contrast between what is now and what once was; between present and past. For Ulysses the past is glorious and the present hour of decaying; and for Tithonus the past is youthful enjoyment and the present ageing predicament.

"In Memoriam" also stands as Tennyson's most elaborate descant on the subject of loss and weaves together virtually all of the thoughts and feelings regarding the past and the passing of time, that pervade

And this he did with wonderful effect. He linked together, as it were, the land and the people who lived on it.

Although Tennyson does not share some traits of the Romantics in his poetry like 'the negative capability' of Keats or seeing Nature as living being influencing human soul or teaching man moral lessons, there are many qualities of the Romantic Movement that we come across in Tennyson's poetry. Had Tennyson been born a century earlier, he would have been a great Romantic.

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