

TENNYSON'S TREATMENT OF MYTHOLOGY AND LEGEND – A REVIEW

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to study the Tennyson's Treatment of Mythology and Legend. Alfred Lord Tennyson, a prominent Victorian poet, engaged deeply with mythology and legend throughout his literary career, reinterpreting classical narratives to resonate with contemporary themes and societal concerns. His treatment of mythology is characterized by a nuanced blend of artistic innovation, moral introspection, and profound symbolism. Tennyson's reimaginings of classical myths, such as "The Lotos-Eaters" and "Ulysses," exemplify his ability to breathe new life into ancient tales while addressing Victorian anxieties about progress, ennui, and the search for meaning. In "The Lotos-Eaters," Tennyson explores the allure of escapism and the consequences of indulgence through the lens of Homer's Odyssey, reflecting Victorian disillusionment with industrialization and societal pressures. Furthermore, Tennyson personalized mythic figures, imbuing them with psychological depth and moral complexity. In "Ulysses," he portrays the legendary hero as a restless spirit yearning for new adventures in old age, resonating with Victorian aspirations for exploration and fulfillment beyond domestic confines. This personalized portrayal humanizes Ulysses, making his internal struggles and existential quest for significance relatable to Tennyson's contemporary audience. Symbolism and allegory are integral to Tennyson's treatment of mythology, serving as vehicles to explore universal themes. In "The Lady of Shalott," based on Arthurian legend, the Lady's tragic isolation in her tower symbolizes the artist's dilemma of creative fulfillment versus societal expectations, offering a poignant commentary on Victorian notions of artistry and autonomy. Through his mastery of poetic imagery and narrative technique, Tennyson crafts evocative portrayals of mythic worlds and characters that transcend temporal and cultural boundaries. His works not only revitalized ancient narratives but also provided profound insights into the human condition, moral dilemmas, and the enduring relevance of myth and legend in shaping individual and collective identities. In conclusion, Tennyson's treatment of mythology and legend remains a testament to his literary genius and his ability to weave timeless tales into the fabric of Victorian consciousness, offering enduring reflections on life, ambition, and the complexities of human experience.

Keywords: Tennyson, Treatment, Mythology and Legend.

INTRODUCTION:

Alfred Lord Tennyson, celebrated as one of the Victorian era's most influential poets, left an indelible mark on English literature through his profound engagement with mythology and legend. Born in 1809 in Somersby, Lincolnshire, Tennyson's early exposure to classical literature and poetry laid the foundation for his lifelong fascination with ancient myths and timeless tales. Throughout his prolific career, Tennyson skillfully reinterpreted these narratives, infusing them with Victorian sensibilities and addressing

contemporary themes. Tennyson's poetry often served as a bridge between the ancient and the modern, offering insightful reflections on human nature, morality, and societal change. His reimaginings of classical myths, such as "Ulysses" and "The Lotos-Eaters," showcased his ability to breathe new life into age-old stories while exploring universal themes of adventure, disillusionment, and the passage of time.

Moreover, Tennyson's personalized portrayals of mythic figures, from King Arthur in "The Idylls of the King" to the tragic Lady of Shalott, demonstrated his deep empathy and understanding of complex human emotions and dilemmas. Through allegory, symbolism, and poignant imagery, Tennyson crafted poetry that resonated with Victorian readers and continues to captivate contemporary audiences, offering timeless insights into the human condition.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

The aim of this paper is to study the Tennyson's Treatment of Mythology and Legend.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This study is based on secondary sources of data such as articles, books, journals, research papers, websites and other sources.

TENNYSON'S TREATMENT OF MYTHOLOGY AND LEGEND

Alfred Lord Tennyson, one of the foremost poets of the Victorian era, demonstrated a profound engagement with mythology and legend throughout his works. His treatment of these ancient narratives was not merely a retelling of old stories but a sophisticated exploration that intertwined timeless themes with contemporary concerns. This study delves into Tennyson's approach to mythology and legend, examining how he reinterpreted classical myths, personalized mythic figures, utilized symbolism and allegory, reflected on national identity, critiqued modernity, and employed poetic imagery and narrative techniques to create enduring works of literature.

1. Reinterpretation and Adaptation of Classical Myths

Tennyson's engagement with classical myths was marked by his ability to reinterpret them through the lens of Victorian sensibilities. He often took familiar stories and reshaped them to address contemporary themes and issues. One notable example is his poem "The Lotos-Eaters," based on a passage from Homer's "Odyssey." In this poem, Tennyson explores themes of ennui, disillusionment, and the allure of escape, which resonated with the Victorian concern over industrialization's impact on society. The lotos-eaters, who live in a state of dreamy languor induced by the lotus flower, serve as a metaphor for those who seek to retreat from the challenges and responsibilities of modern life.

Another instance of Tennyson's reinterpretation is found in "Ulysses," where he portrays the legendary Greek hero Odysseus (Ulysses in Latin) as an aging king yearning for new adventures. Tennyson's Ulysses speaks of restlessness and a desire to explore beyond the confines of his settled life,

reflecting Victorian notions of ambition and the quest for fulfillment. By humanizing Ulysses in this way, Tennyson makes him relatable to his contemporary audience, who may have been grappling with similar existential dilemmas in the face of societal expectations and domesticity.

2. Personalization of Mythic Figures

Beyond reinterpreting myths, Tennyson personalized mythic figures by delving into their inner lives and moral dilemmas. In his cycle of Arthurian poems, collectively known as "The Idylls of the King," Tennyson focuses on King Arthur and his knights, exploring their relationships, struggles, and ultimate downfall. Each knight embodies different virtues and flaws, reflecting the complexities of human nature and moral choices. For example, Sir Lancelot's affair with Queen Guinevere and its repercussions on the kingdom illustrate themes of love, loyalty, and betrayal. Tennyson's portrayal of Lancelot's internal conflict and guilt adds depth to the character, portraying him not just as a heroic figure but as a flawed human grappling with the consequences of his actions. Similarly, Tennyson's depiction of Merlin, the legendary wizard, in "Merlin and Vivien" explores themes of power, manipulation, and the corrupting influence of ambition. Vivien, a seductive and cunning woman, uses her wiles to ensnare and eventually imprison Merlin, showcasing Tennyson's exploration of gender dynamics and the dangers of unchecked ambition.

3. Symbolism and Allegory in Tennyson's Works

Mythology and legend served as potent vehicles for Tennyson's exploration of universal themes through symbolism and allegory. In "The Lady of Shalott," based on the Arthurian legend of Elaine of Astolat, Tennyson uses the Lady's tragic tale as an allegory of artistic isolation and the conflict between personal fulfillment and societal expectations. The Lady, confined to her tower and cursed to weave images without experiencing the world directly, symbolizes the artist's dilemma of creating beauty at the cost of personal freedom and fulfillment.

Moreover, Tennyson's use of symbolism is evident in "Tithonus," where he revisits the Greek myth of Tithonus, the mortal lover of Eos (the goddess of dawn), who is granted immortality but not eternal youth. Tithonus's eternal aging becomes a symbol of the consequences of unchecked progress and the fleeting nature of human desires. Through this myth, Tennyson critiques the Victorian obsession with scientific and technological advancement, suggesting that not all progress leads to desirable outcomes.

4. Reflections on National Identity and Cultural Heritage

Tennyson's engagement with British legends, particularly those of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, reflects his interest in exploring themes of national identity and cultural heritage. "The Idylls of the King" is a prime example of how Tennyson reimagines these legends to comment on Victorian Britain's ideals and aspirations.

The character of King Arthur, portrayed as a noble and just ruler striving to uphold chivalric virtues, embodies the Victorian ideal of leadership and moral integrity. However, Arthur's eventual downfall, brought about by internal discord and betrayal, serves as a cautionary tale about the fragility of unity and the consequences of moral compromise. Tennyson's portrayal of Camelot as a utopian kingdom on the brink of collapse reflects Victorian anxieties about social cohesion and the challenges of maintaining a harmonious society amidst rapid change.

5. Critique of Modernity in Tennyson's Poetry

Tennyson's engagement with mythology and legend also allowed him to critique the rapid changes brought about by modernity. In poems such as "The Palace of Art" and "The Two Voices," Tennyson explores themes of isolation, existential despair, and the loss of spiritual meaning in an increasingly industrialized and materialistic world. "The Palace of Art" depicts a soul who builds a magnificent palace filled with artistic and intellectual pursuits but ultimately finds herself empty and unfulfilled. This allegory of spiritual emptiness and the dehumanizing effects of excessive ambition reflects Tennyson's critique of Victorian materialism and the prioritization of intellectual pursuits over emotional and spiritual fulfillment. Similarly, "The Two Voices" presents a dialogue between a despondent narrator contemplating suicide and a hopeful voice urging him to find solace in nature and spiritual renewal. The poem reflects Tennyson's exploration of existential despair and the search for meaning in a world marked by technological advancement and social upheaval.

6. Poetic Imagery and Narrative Techniques

Throughout his treatment of mythology and legend, Tennyson demonstrates a mastery of poetic imagery and narrative techniques that enhance the emotional and dramatic impact of his works. His use of vivid descriptive language, rhythmic verse, and rich symbolism creates a sensory experience that transports readers into the mythical worlds he evokes.

For example, in "The Lady of Shalott," Tennyson's evocative descriptions of the Lady's weaving and the enchanting landscape around her immerse the reader in the haunting beauty of her predicament. Similarly, in "Morte d'Arthur," the tragic death of King Arthur is portrayed with lyrical intensity, capturing the solemnity and grandeur of the Arthurian legend.

Tennyson's narrative techniques, such as his use of dramatic monologue in "Ulysses" and "Tithonus," allow readers to enter into the inner thoughts and emotions of his characters. This intimate portrayal of their struggles and aspirations deepens the reader's understanding of the human condition and the timeless themes explored in his poetry.

CONCLUSION

Alfred Lord Tennyson's exploration of mythology and legend stands as a testament to his literary prowess and enduring impact on English poetry. Throughout his works, Tennyson reinvigorated ancient narratives with Victorian sensibilities, addressing timeless themes such as ambition, love, betrayal, and the quest for meaning in a rapidly changing world. By reinterpreting classical myths and personalizing mythic figures, he offered profound insights into the complexities of human nature and moral dilemmas. Tennyson's use of symbolism and allegory further enriched his poetic explorations, providing layers of meaning that resonate beyond the specific contexts of his time. Whether through the haunting isolation of "The Lady of Shalott" or the restless yearning of "Ulysses," Tennyson's poetry delved deep into the human psyche, offering reflections on individual aspirations and societal challenges.

Moreover, Tennyson's mastery of poetic imagery and narrative technique continues to captivate readers, bridging the gap between ancient legends and Victorian concerns with a lyrical intensity that remains timeless. His works serve as a poignant reminder of the enduring power of myth and legend to illuminate universal truths about the human condition, ensuring his place as a seminal figure in the canon of English literature.

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