

Reasons Why Tennyson Chose To Write Idylls Rather than something more contemporary to his age

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ABSTRACT

Tennyson, the 19th century Victorian novelist and poet stands out as a great literary figure of the age. Tennyson was dissatisfied with his contemporary age, as its false values were un acceptable to him. Tennyson. in order to guide his society towards a correct moral behaviour chose to give his people an example from the history of king Artwr.He made his choice because both Arturs's kingdom and Tennyson's England were Christian, and both shared a common culture, thus he prefered to give an example from British history rather than classical history. By tracint the kingom of Arthur from bisth to destructin, tennyson wished to warn his own society of the impending danger of destruction, unless th people were willing to improve them selves morally. He epecially appealled to the women to help reotore the ralues of society. This paper disasses the differeut episodes in his famous work-rdylls of the the king, and simultaneouly Tennyson adds his own judgmeut, being both interpretive and didactic at the same time.

KEY WORDS

arthurian world . victorian england . decay . destruction .
moral choice . social disintegration . faithfulness . spiritual
world . spiritual progress . ideal .

Tennyson remembered all his life that once as a child he was standing with outstretched arms on the lawn at Somersby and exclaimed - "I hear a voice that's speaking in the Wind."¹ However it was not unique for a child to hear imaginary voices but for Tennyson, it was a significant gesture - the voice seemed to permeate in his imagination bringing with it a message and that Tennyson called "the passions of the past." From the beginning Tennyson was aware not only of the poet's relation to a cultural heritage, but also of his place in a family to whom literature was a 'concern' and an 'escape'. Often as a child he would wander off alone on night walks and yearn for death. But at an early stage in life he learned how to sublimate his feelings and that was by writing verse.

Those who knew Tennyson have repeatedly emphasized his longing for the "lost and gone". He literally worshipped the past and "held a personal dislike of the present,"² and his dislike for the present all the more escalated his love for the past. What Tennyson finds distressing in the present is its emptiness, and he sees this emptiness as a vacuum, which he expressed more as a numbness, than an anguish. He wrote in one of his earlier poems-

"I have no real breath,
my being is a vacant worthlessness."³

This feeling is fully expressed in Maud where the protagonist imagines himself to be lying buried beneath the street. This is a death-in-life situation where the poet is merely existing but his existence is only an act of dying. Time somehow passes but without significance or meaning. His indifference towards the present and its failure to evoke any emotions, all the more gives Tennyson reasons to believe that the

present cannot be a domain for the existence of reality. He once wrote to a friend- "To me, the far off world seems nearer than the present, for in the present is always something unreal and indistinct, but the other seems a solid planet."⁴ The present then was empty and unreal and the past stable and complete. The past was a fulfillment which was lacking in the present, and the emptiness of the present is expressed quite often in his poems.

In the Idylls, Tennyson draws from the Arthurian world what he thinks is relevant to the modern world. As Charles Kingsley comments - "we can trust him with the past, for he has discovered the great historic secret of finding the Present in the Past, and embodying in out-wardly obsolete legends eternal truths which shall stand good to the end of time."⁵ The Liberal Anglican idea of History by Forbes, explains one of the reasons why Tennyson chose an Arthurian source to explore his contemporary times. Arthur's kingdom was both English and Christian, and in this respect bore a resemblance to Tennyson's audience. Each cycle in the history of a nation explain's Forbe, is a complete example of development, and the stages of development form a parallel comparison to similar stages in the development of other nations. The Arthurian cycle could explain Victorian England, and in order to explain the condition of England, the cycle had to be historical. Tennyson could possibly not have used a contemporary cycle, for, part of the Idylls is about growth, and decay of a nation, and the poet would have to deal with a nation which had gone through the whole cycle. In other words, it would be necessary for him to deal with the past, for the cycle was complete rather than the present where the nation was still in the process of the cycle and one could only contemplate of its destruction. And in order to teach the lessons of history, philosophy and society Tennyson chose a historical period.

The moral choice of an individual plays significant part in the development of events. Even though individuals cannot prevent social disintegration even if he is an ideal individual like Arthur. Yet it does

not mean that there is no necessity for moral choice, and that determinism rules all. A nation can, through the exercise of moral choice, either contribute to the spiritual advance of mankind or it can stagnate it. Therefore progress of a nation or kingdom depends on the proper exercise of moral choice.

Here is Hallam Tennyson's judgement of the Idylls - "yet in spite of the ebbs and flows in the tide of human affairs, inspite of the temporary bearing down of the pure and lofty purpose, the author has carefully shadowed forth the spiritual progress and advance of the world, and has enshrined man's highest hopes in this new-old legend, crowning with a poet's prophetic vision the vague and disjointed dreams of a bygone age."⁶ Lancelot, Guinevere, and others are morally blameworthy, though at the same time their purity would not have prevented the destruction of the kingdom. Even though their sins were to affect the spiritual advancement which Arthur's kingdom was to make over its predecessors, yet they could not prevent the social disintegration which was doomed to have happened.

The Idylls has also been thought to be unified in the theme of 'soul against sense' and this is to be found in the interaction of character upon character. It is assumed that Arthur represents soul, and Lancelot is torn between his love for Arthur, or soul, and his love for Guinevere, or sense. For Tennyson it was important to discover the proper balance between the two-soul, and sense. Related to this theme of 'soul against sense' is related the theme of 'marital disharmony'.⁷ It is not exactly a marital disharmony, since few characters are married, it is rather the relation between men and women, specifically the role women play in restoration and destruction of the individual; and social integration or dissipation. The relationship between Arthur and Guinevere is an example of the failure of man to join with women, and the disintegration of marriage leads to the disintegration of his ideal world. "Because women have great powers for good and evil, it is as destructive to neglect the influence of a good woman as it is to submit to the influence

of a bad one."⁸ The women question is not only vital in the Idylls but was also a significant question of the nineteenth - century. The role played by Lynette in the first book - Gareth and Lynette is dual, she is a test of Gareth's courtesy, and also an encouragement in his tests as a knight. She encourages fearlessness which allows him to overcome his opponents. Enid, who is an example of modesty, patience and faithfulness, contrasts sharply to the volatile Lynette. Enid plays an important role in the integration of Edyrn and Geraint. The poet then is dealing with the role women play in encouraging social responsibility simply by being good women. Balin and Balan deal with the role of women in reforming an individual life from a life of violence. Eventually Balin, not only loses the influence of Guinevere but is also subjected to the influence of Vivien and is doomed to destruction. Balin and Balan deals not only with the destruction or redemption of the individual but also deal's with a woman's social role. If man is under the influence of perverse women, he is likely to be susceptible to moral irresponsibility. Tennyson presents the women characters on different pedestals. First we are introduced to an impatient Lynette, then the perfect Enid, she is followed by the evil minded Vivien who is followed by the spiritual Elaine, followed by the adultery of Guinevere. The whole cycle shows the progressive corruption of Arthur's court by the effect of Guinevere's infidelity. The contribution of women in the destruction of the knights is of prime importance. Tennyson wanted to preserve values which he felt were vulnerable in the Victorian world and the reason why he chose to write the Idylls was that he could teach the historical lesson of the degeneration of a society in which truth and faithfulness became corrupted. It is quite clear that Tennyson's main concern was to preserve for women her traditional role as 'complement' rather than an equal of man. This was Tennyson's fight for an ideal womanhood which was a fight to be lost in the nineteenth - century.

Tennyson wanted to seek freedom from the pressures of the time, the social and economic concerns, in order to interpret the spiritual

crises of his culture. In the Idylls he gives his vision of modern society an objectivity and perspective. There are in the poem reflections of his distaste for certain Victorian practices. He could be attacking Catholic ritualism when he describes King Pellam's chapel over decorated with plaster saints. By describing the downfall of Arthur's kingdom which was an embodiment of idealism, Tennyson was probably warning nineteenth-century England of the possibility of its downfall.

Arthur is presented not as "that gray king" of legend but a timeless figure, a symbol of ideal manhood closed in real man. What it means to serve or live in the ideal is an important part of Tennyson's poems. Without such ideals, thinks Tennyson, man has a tendency to wallow. Man does not attain the unattainable just as the Round Table does not fulfil Arthur's dreams. It is not attainment but struggle towards the ideal that is of importance to Tennyson, and in writing about Arthur, Tennyson presents his ideal. Arthur's failure tells of the failure of man's existence and the failure of his power to live. Tennyson reveals in the Idylls the religious contradictions - we are repelled by Pellam's religious devotions which are dominated by hypocrisy; and in the piety of the ones in quest of the Grail we see how moral life can be idly dreamed away.

Tennyson is also pre-occupied with meta-physical questions in regard to the spiritual and material world. For Tennyson, the material world was only an illusion and dream. In the Idylls Tennyson asks men to free themselves from the bonds of material existence which would be the beginning of salvation, he writes in the Princess-

"of the wild woods together; and a Voice
went with it, 'Follow, follow, thou shalt win.'"

Through his art Tennyson wanted to accelerate this notion of apprehending reality which can only be accomplished if man could free himself from the bondage of material existence, his aspirations should be spiritual rather than material. However he was aware of the difficulty of this accomplishment, as the biggest barrier would be the self - the selfish

self. The phase of life on which the Idylls comments is the history of the age of Tennyson which he saw as a period of political and scientific progress but followed by a spiritual decline - the overthrow of religion by science and traditional morality by materialistic ethics. Through the poem Tennyson also comments that everything is getting worse. By writing of the threats to Arthur's kingdom, Tennyson also represents the forces in Victorian society which are harmful to spiritual progress. Tennyson's work handles social questions as he was obsessed by the traditional culture of England and did not want his age to head towards disaster like that of Arthur's kingdom. In the Idylls he warns against the social dangers of hypocrisy, and thereby gives his poetry a moral purpose.

The backward look for future guidance was not only a characteristic of Tennyson but also a characteristic of Carlyle - both shared the fears of a revolution. The entire book of Past and Present describes life in a twelfth - century monastery, "in the hope," says Carlyle "of perhaps illustrating our own poor century thereby."⁹ Carlyle dominated the mid - century because his eye was always in the present, wholly or partly. Carlyle's view was that "the moral justification for learning about the past lay in its relevance to the problematic present."¹⁰ He saw the past as a 'whirling smoke' and said the historian's main task was to peer into it for human faces.

The topic of most of his texts is man, man as a struggler, and he wanted his books to reach the workers though it was addressed first to the middle class. He asks his readers to notice the condition of the workers. His plea at the end of Past and Present is a plea for man, a man with a 'living voice' probably referring to poets and writers. In the first chapter of the book he describes England as a country which has an abundance of wealth, produce and supply of human want in every kind, yet England is dying because of an emptiness. "We have sumptuous garmitures for our Life, but have forgotten to live in the middle of them we have more riches than any nation ever had before; our

successful industry is hitherto unsuccessful; strange success, if we stop here!"¹¹ He talks of existence in his society becoming a nightmare. He laments on the fading away of religion in his age and prescribes human beings to find an ideal in religion. William Henry Smith - a reviewer well illustrated Carlyle's thoughts - "Mr. Carlyle very fairly finds the calamity of the times not in bad bills of Parliament, nor the remedy in good bill, but the vice in false and superficial aims of the people, and the remedy in honesty and in sight..... the picture of an English nation all sitting enchanted, the poor enchanted so they cannot work, the rich enchanted so they cannot enjoy..... the exposure of the progress of fraud into all arts and social activities."¹²

We thus find Tennyson and Carlyle in the same dilemma of the age - both seek in the past a consolation to the otherwise bleakness of their age. The Idylls in a sense is a prophecy, for Tennyson, is anticipating a calamity similar to the one in Arthur's kingdom. Tennyson explains to his audience the need and importance of an ideal without which man is nothing but a clod - "I tried in my Idylls to teach men the need of the ideal."¹³ As mentioned earlier, it is not the attainment of the ideal that is important but the struggle towards it which is of significance to man, for in this struggle man examines his own powers which is a great concern for Tennyson. As Socrates says - "the life which is unexamined is not worth living."¹⁴ The Idylls then serves as mirror through which Tennyson sees his own age reflected. The role women play in the Idylls is certainly relevant to the women question in Victorian Age. The dual attitude towards religion is also criticized by Tennyson along with the morals of the time. As materialism was progressing, spiritualism was regressing, and this regress could be the ultimate cause of the collapse of a nation.

FOOTNOTES

1. Buckley J.H. (1960) Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet p.1.
2. Fracis, A. (1965) Criticts Essays p.108.
3. Tennyson, charles (1931) Perdidi Diem p.35.
4. Critical Essays, opcit p.111.
5. Hellstrom, (1972) On the Poems of Tennyson p.92.
6. Ibid p.98.
7. Ibid p.108.
8. Ibid p.109.
9. Ibid p.93.
10. Tillotson, (1978) A View of Victorian Literature p.56.
11. Carlyle, (1897) Past and Present p.5.
12. Seigel, (1971) Carlyle The Critical Heritage - p.220.
13. Rosernberg (1973) The Fall of Camelot p.37.
14. Reed (1969) Idylls of the King p.9.



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