

**TWO DIFFERENT PHILOSOPHY OF HUMAN LIFE AS DELINEATED IN
ALFRED TENNYSON'S
TWO MYTHICAL POEMS *ULYSSES* AND *THE LOTOS-EATERS***

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Abstract:

Myths and legends have always been incorporated in English literature to frame artistic and aesthetic milieu in literary works. Like many other English poets, Tennyson has often used mythical and legendary characters as spokesmen for his own attitude and mood. Tennyson adopts characters from the myths and legends but presents them in his own way to universalize the inner mood and spirit of such characters. Colder (1971) opines that Tennyson frequently presented legendary heroes as spokesmen for his own moral attitudes, but he was also concerned to show the innate moral heroism of ordinary domestic and national life. In this connection, Alfred Lord Tennyson's two mythical poems *Ulysses* and *The Lotos-Eaters* present two contradictory phases of human life. In *Ulysses*, the hero Ulysses represents the mood of restlessness, full of action and ever striving personality; On the other hand, in *The Lotos-Eaters* the same hero along with his sailors are exhausted and lethargic in life and willing to enjoy rest of their life forgetting the weariness of past life. This paper is an attempt to explore the 'action' and 'inaction' philosophy of life in the two couplet poems - *Ulysses* and *The Lotos-Eaters* respectively. Further, the paper will focus on the original myth of *Ulysses* and Tennyson's own treatment with the same to express the dissimilar concepts of human life for modern readers. Finally, I think the readers will find the article very interesting and thought-provoking and they can easily understand the dissimilar philosophy of humans' life as delineated in Tennyson's two mythical poems *Ulysses* and *The Lotos-Eaters* respectively.

Keywords: Myths and Legends, mythical poems, the mood of restlessness, 'action' and 'inaction' philosophy of life, Ulysses, The Lotus-Eater, Adventurous and Inquisitiveness in life.

Introduction:

The study of myth began from the very beginning of human civilization and it continued to provide an important source of raw materials for the poets and writers of all times. In the process of the development of English literature myth and legends plays a significant role, especially in the framing of literary concept and themes. However, modern approaches often view myths and legends as a demonstration of social, cultural or psychological truths, rather than exact historical truth. Like many other English poets, Tennyson has also used myths and legends in some of his poetry; for example, *Tithonus*, *Oenone*, *Ulysses* and so on. Such poems are directly based on classical myth. But, Tennyson's treatments of the classical myths in his composition are not like those of Hellenic Age. Tennyson draws the myths and legends and adopts them to express a mood of modern readers. His mythical characters represent the universal appeal, spirit, and fashion of the human soul. He maintains the originality of the mythical characters but skillfully blended them and set the meaning with the modern thought.

Tennyson was through and through a Victorian and poet laureate (Stephen, 2000, p. 246). As a representative of Victorian-era, he has tried to create such mood and theme that have universal appeal, meaning, and acceptance to the readers. In this regard, he has chosen such characters from a classical myth which can express his deep idealism, spirit, and philosophy. In the Victorian period, England achieved notable progress in the material and intellectual level. It was an age alive with new activities. Tennyson as a believer of advancement in all spheres of life has recreated the character of Ulysses with the spirit of unbridle thirst for knowledge and search for the newer world. Regarding the rapid progress in Arts and Sciences Long (1909, p. 454) comments, 'the Victorian Age is especially remarkable because of its rapid progress in all arts and sciences and in mechanical inventions.

Although many of Tennyson's early poems were based on classical myth, this paper will focus on the messages and themes of two pair poems in particular – *Ulysses* and *The Lotos-Eaters* – in these two poems two contrasting philosophy of life have been depicted. In the poem *Ulysses*, for example, the hero represents the spirit of inquiry, intellectual ferment and the expedition for knowledge at the Victorian age. On the contrary, in *The Lotos-Eaters*, a reverse aspect of life has been presented. Unlike Ulysses, here in *Lotus Land*, the mariners promise not to sail anymore. They argued one after another in favor of a life of full rest and inaction in the isolated land where there is no sign of earthly pain and tension.

Literature Review and Critical Discussion:

Using myths and legendary characters in literature is a common phenomenon for the writers and poets of all ages. Regarding myth and Literature, Achebe (1975) remarks that art

is and was always in the service of man. This remark implies that myth and legends were not only the mere story but also such have similar human implications. Regarding the function of myth in literature, Peter (1974) points out that myth can mean 'sacred story', 'traditional narrative' or 'tale of the gods'; a myth can also be a story to explain why something exists. In this respect the remark of Eliot (1965, p. 681) is worth mentioning: "It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." Thus, the use of myth in literary works including poetry serves human purposes and denotes various positive message, warning, and themes to the readers.

Tennyson regenerated the figure of Ulysses (Ulysses is the Latin form of Greek name Odysseus), the hero of Homer's *Odyssey* and the medieval hero of Dante's *Inferno*. In Homer's *Odyssey*, (*Scroll xii*) it is learned from a prophecy that he has to go to a final voyage after killing the suitors of his wife, Penelope. He is the first of the Greek epic heroes to be renowned for brain and muscle. His mental and physical attributes are of equal importance in helping him to achieve his goal. His courage, wits, and stability enable him to endure all his difficulties (Snodgrass, 2001). The details of the voyage of Ulysses are found in Dante's *Inferno*, *Canto xxvi*. Ulysses tells, how, after his return to Ithaca, neither his love for his son nor for his wife or his kingdom could pacify his desire to set out on the sea voyage sea to gain experience and knowledge. As they approach the Pillars of Hercules, Ulysses urges his crew:

*'Brothers,' I said, 'o you, who having crossed
a hundred thousand dangers, reach the west,
to this brief waking-time that still is left
unto your senses, you must not deny
experience of that which lies beyond
the sun, and of the world that is unpeopled.
Consider well the seed that gave you birth:*

*[Inferno, Canto XXVI, lines 112-120, Mandelbaum
Translation.]*

Dante's hero *Ulysses* is a tragic figure. Though he returned to his homeland Ithaca, he found him unhappy and restless and nothing could stop him from going to further adventure. He reassembled his old companions, sailed towards the west beyond the Pillars of Hercules and eventually a storm sank the ship and killed him with his sailors. However, Tennyson's Ulysses is full of spirit and enthusiasm and there is no sign of any failure in his voyage. To sail west in one last adventure "stress[es] Ulysses' capacity for enthusiasm, but it also reinforces the impression of a restless wanderer and strongly implies that the enthusiasm is rather for self-gratification than for pursuing knowledge" (Pettigrew, 1963, p. 27-45). Here the character of Ulysses has been marked more for self-gratification than for pursuing

knowledge. On the contrary, Radcliffe (2016) asserts that Ulysses crystallizes the poet's need to find a new version of faith to cope with anguish. Here the voyage of Ulysses has been distinguished as a journey of his faith towards an unknown destination. However, Tennyson's *Ulysses* must not be read with such a partial view. In this respect the comments of Findlay (1981, p. 139-149) is remarkable - *Ulysses* is not a richly ambivalent poem, nor would one wish to reduce its meaning to one narrowly programmatic reading." Therefore, there is no scope of reading from a narrow point of view of the spirit and enthusiasm of Tennyson's Ulysses.

The poem *The Lotos-Eaters* is also based on the classical story of Ulysses (Odysseus). In Homer's story, Odyssey all the survivors of the Trojan war have reached their homes safely with the exception of Ulysses and his fellow sailors. They are wanderings and going through many torments in the sea. In the course of their wanderings in the sea (Book -9), they reached to the magic island of Lotos-Eaters."He and his ships were driven across the sea for nine days. On the tenth, they made the land of the Lotos-Eaters and put in there. But they were weary through and through and in need of refreshment. Also, they were to leave quickly. The inhabitants of Lotos Land met them with kindness and gave them flower-food to eat, but those who tasted it, only a few, fortunately, lost their longing for home. They wanted only to dwell in the *Lotos Land* and let the memory of all that had been fade from their minds. Odysseus had to drag them on shipboard and chain them there. They wept, so great was their desire to stay, tasting forever the honey –sweet flowers" (Hamilton, 1963, p.258). It is such an island where time remains inactive, seems to be afternoon and all things always seem the same. In this dreamy island, the Mariners feel lazy air and heavy mist curling the hillside.

In the poem, *The Lotos-Eaters*, Ulysses and his sailors came unto a land in which it seemed always afternoon. In such mysterious and strange atmosphere, mild-eyed Lotos-eaters come with branches full of fruits and flowers of magic Lotus. The hungry sailors taste the Lotus and fell into a deep sleep. After that, they sit on the yellow sand of the sea-shore and find the setting sun before them along with the rising moon behind. There they sing a Choric Song together and all associations lead their mind to rethink about the aim and meaning of life. In this regard, Markley (2004) opines that Tennyson was clearly attempting to write English poems with a modern relevance for an English audience. ...*The Lotos-Eaters* represent[s] the danger of allowing oneself to be distracted and waylaid by sensual pleasure. Another argument has been pointed out by Fulweiler (1965) in which he says that to sail back to Ithaca, with the hopes of one day being reunited with home and family, means work and pain. This argument brings out the average family life avoiding the tendency of the sailors. In this respect, Kincaid (1969) posits that settling back into that life that they had left so long ago, readjusting to civilian existence, would only "trouble joy" for themselves; to stay on the island avoids all of that confusion and emotional pain, and releases the mariners from all

forms of responsibility. In the Lotos land, the sailors will stay for hypothetical gains and the crew would rather focus on immediate pleasure. Maclaren (1961) coins the fact that the Mariners sound extremely Epicurean in this text: "Convinced that they would become involved in struggles with evil if they should depart and seek to re-enter their familiar world, the sailors reject this course of action because it would give them no pleasure." Thus, the island seems a paradise to the sailors free from the weariness of their past life.

Ulysses:

The poem '*Ulysses*' was written in the first few weeks after the death of his bosom college friend, Arthur Henry Hallam in 1833 and revised for publication in 1842. It is written as a dramatic monologue, the entire poem is spoken by a single character. Tennyson's Ulysses is an adaptation of these two classical characters –Homer's Odysseus and Dante's Ulysses. However, in this poem, the character of Ulysses is somehow modeled as it is in Dante's *Inferno*. He represents the inner spirit of the human soul – adventurous, curious and restlessness in nature. In this poem, *Ulysses* argues in favor of his further adventure in the sea. Ulysses has returned home, Ithaca after twenty years wandering - in Trojan War and on the sea. He speaks to an unidentified audience that he is unwilling to lead a lazy life. He thinks that such vegetable life in Ithaca is not for him. He is by nature adventurous and that there is no point in his staying home.

He recalls his past life and finds that he has lived a stirring and adventurous life and gained experience and knowledge of men and things. But his temptation for knowledge and adventure is still afresh and there are many more places, things, and experiences what are untouched yet. In his calculation, human life is too short but knowledge is vast and unlimited and single life is not enough to gain all knowledge. He has already spent much of his time and he has only a few years of his short life. Therefore, he makes his mind to make the best use of his every moment of the remaining amount of time to follow knowledge like a sinking star.

He has no tension regarding his ordinary duties to his land as his own son Telemachus is worthy enough to look after this state. His son would be quite happy to take the responsibility of ruling the land, while he would go for an adventure in the sea. He recalls that he along with his fellow sailors faced great dangers and difficulties in the past. So he knows how to face the adverse situation in life. No doubt that now they have grown old and upcoming death would close all, but he firmly believes that still, he can seek a newer world.

Here the tone and the messages may be compared with Robert Frost's famous poem, *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, stated in the concluding line:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,

*But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.*

[Lines: 13-16]

Ulysses declares that he is strong in will to sail towards the west even beyond the western horizon, 'to strive to seek, to find and not to yield'. Thus the whole poem is a journey towards a new adventure, knowledge, and regeneration of the inner spirit of humanity. The poem, of course, provides various motivating messages and moral courage to the modern readers. From religious and Philosophical point of view, it transmits the nature of Restlessness of the human soul and its insatiable thirst to know the unknown. And from a realistic point of view the poem suggests that it is never too late to discover new things and new world. It teaches that a person should never leave the hope of winning or standing again against the adverse situations of life. If someone is strong in will, then from any situation or at any age he can snatch his victory or stand again.

The Lotos-Eaters:

The poem, *The Lotos-Eaters* is a seventh stanza poem; Poem is divided into two parts. The first part is a descriptive narrative (Lines 1-45) and the second part is a song of eight numbered stanzas of varying length (Lines 46-173). The first part of the poem is written in nine –lines Spenserian stanzas' like ABABBCBCC with the first eight lines in iambic pentameter and the final line in an Alexandrine (Line of six iambic feet). The poem strikingly contrasts with the spirit of pair poem *Ulysses*.

In the course of the returning journey of Ulysses, he along with his crew reached the *Lotos Land* in the afternoon. In the *Lotos Land*, they find everything in isolation, in rest and free from weariness. In such an atmosphere and stage of life they sing a Choric song together and in their song, they present a various argument in favor of a life that is a life of inaction and lethargic in nature. However, the arguments of the sailors have the deep philosophical meaning as they express some fact of human suffering and labor in the world. They ask why man; the best creation of God should suffer alone. They observe that all is maturing and going towards death silently and peacefully except human. Why is our life full of labor? Why are we the victim of cruel destination? The mariners create a question about the valueless struggle of human life also.

*Why are we weigh'd upon with heaviness
And utterly consumed with sharp distress,
While all things else have rest from weariness?
All things have rest; whys should we toil alone,
We only toil, who are the first of things.*

[Lines: 57- 61]

Do they ask if death is the end of life then why all life be full of valueless struggle and labor? They find human life is too short and running fast towards death. Man dies in no time and they can take nothing from the world. Besides, after death, they are forgotten soon.

*Death is the end of life; ah, why
Should life all labor be?
Let us alone.*

[Lines: 86-88]

They visualize of their long journey of life, dead friends and terrible experiences. They think, perhaps the dead bodies of their fellow soldiers have been converted into dust. Besides, they left their family before long twenty years. In their absence, their children must have taken over the responsibilities of their home. So it would be unwise to go back and disturb them! They imagine the disorder and chaos of their homeland developed in their absence. Now they are old and their eye-sight has been weak. They would not be able to play an active role and make an order again there.

*Let what is broken so remain.
The Gods are hard to reconcile:
'Tis hard to settle order once again.
There is confusion worse than death,
Trouble on trouble, pain on pain,*

[Lines: 125-129]

So it is better to remain here on this island, eat Lotos, enjoy rest and wait for death. In the concluding lines, the Mariners change their tone and feel jealous of the luxurious lifestyle of god and goddess who are indifferent to the miseries and sufferings of human beings. They drink the nectar, see the destruction of land, crops and living beings including human but take no action. A man prays to god but gods do nothing to save mankind. God hears the painful cries but remains deaf to such. At this stage the tone of the sailors is pessimistic and they speak with contempt about Pagan god and goddess and criticize their inaction in the real crisis of human.

Finally, the sailors decide that they will wonder no more, will stay at *Lotos Land* and enjoy rest in isolation because slumber is sweeter than toil. They further argue -

Comparative Analysis between Ulysses and The Lotus Eaters:

In these two poems, two different human ideologies have been expressed. Though Ulysses is the common hero in both of the poems, the readers hardly find any common characteristics of him. Here two characters represent two different spirits, thoughts, messages

and moods. In *Ulysses* the hero serves the purpose of curiosity and adventure of the human soul, on the contrary, in *The Lotos-Eaters* the protagonist argues for the necessity of rest and contemplation for all moving and suffering souls. In both poems, the hero recalls the glorious past life and experiences; in *Ulysses*, the hero is inspired by the past experiences and finds inspiration for further adventure, on the other hand in *The Lotos-Eaters* the protagonist is tired of his laboring and painful journey of life and henceforth wants to escape from such. Another distinctive view of life is insignificant regarding old age. In *Ulysses*, the poet expresses that old age has yet his honor and his toil and there is no time to seek a newer world; in contrast in *The Lotos-Eaters* it is expressed that old age is an obstacle and burden to take new adventure and challenge rather it is a period of rest. Further, dissimilar philosophy of life is marked regarding the future course of action in two pair poems. In *Ulysses*, the sailor prepares themselves to face the unpredictable dangers in life during their upcoming voyage in the sea but in *The Lotos-Eaters* the crew dream and plan for a passive, calm and lethargic life in the isolated *Lotos Land*.

Conclusion:

It is to be marked that in both of the poems the protagonists are escapist, isolated and are trying to avoid the realities of regular human life. In *Ulysses*, the hero has spent all his life in adventure and now he cannot adjust himself in his own land and longs for further journey ignoring his duty to his family, people, and land. Conversely, in *The Lotos-Eaters*, the Mariners are revolting against the spirit of life and ready to live in the dreamy land forgetting their actual duty towards family, land, and people. Thus it is observed that in both poems the protagonist along with the crews is acting according to their own will and ready to fulfill their personal interest. In fact, the characters are true to themselves but escapist to the rest of the world, to their people and to their family members. Thus, the character of Ulysses is the embodiment of two dissimilar states of human mind; one in the poem *Ulysses*, the automatic force of human soul which is by nature inquisitive and exploratory; and another in *The Lotos-Eaters*, the subconscious tendency of human soul searching for exemption from the duties of life and ready to embrace eternal peace in isolation. Thus Alfred Lord Tennyson delineated the two different philosophy of human life through two different poems like *Ulysses* and *The Lotos-Eaters*.

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