

Tennyson's vision of nature

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Abstract. This study explores Tennyson's vision of nature through a careful reviewing of many of his poems. The paper demonstrates in clear terms Tennyson's skills in drawing wonderful nature scenes in his poems and making these scenes reflect his inner feeling and speak out his own philosophy that may not defer from the common attitudes of his society. To him, nature is unexpected, brings life and brings death. It is also moody and unreliable, sometimes a friend, sometimes a foe. Tennyson realizes a kind of similarity between man and nature especially in terms of life and death. Nature must always loom large in any study of Victorian poetry, since it was one of the three or four most important poetic themes. For successful foundation of Tennyson's poems Nature serves as one of basic functions. We cannot consider Tennyson in terms of the Romantic poets as a poet of Nature but we see that certainly he treats Nature by his close scientific and minute observation. Very often he anticipates Nature to describe and develop the human in general."(Amin)

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1.Introduction

Reviewing many of Tennyson poems, one may develop a kind of understanding that the poet, because of his great interest in nature, goes to establish a true friendship with it to an extent that he makes his mind open to it, and in return nature yields to him to create in the end a mutual relationship where each may become an influence to another on the way of building a landscape poetry. He made nature express his feelings and help him color his life. Through nature Tennyson could also express his own philosophy and ideas regarding life and death in addition to a total understanding of the universe in general.

This paper intends to trace nature influence on Tennyson and demonstrate how this influence helps to establish the poet's vision of nature. The study tries to show how Tennyson draws fantastic nature scenes in poems and how he makes nature express his inner feelings and reveal his deep philosophy that may come in accordance with the common feelings of his society.

From his early days, Lord Alfred Tennyson (1809 – 1892) showed a great interest in nature for he grew up in a country-side; Somersby is a picturesque little village, near the town of Louth in Lincolnshire with attractive landscape; valleys rich in flowery hollows with patches of meadows and cornfields; little brooks and old granges and ivy-covered cottages. The boy could hold intimate relationship with it away from the nosy streets of the city to the point he was to be described by others as 'shy and reserved with strangers yet, as Moore says, 'remarkable for a keen love of nature in all its details.' His Nature poetry started early at the age of four even before learning how to read and

write. He started his first line of poetry with a clear reference to nature: 'I hear a voice that's speaking in the wind'. (5)

Later and after publishing a lot of poems, he won from his readers and critics a title of 'landscape poet', His friend Hallam called him the 'picturesque', and another intimate says, 'Tennyson set his craftsman's interest in the problem of landscape.' (Mucluban, 75)

His accurate description of scenes is not a normal accumulation of his readings but rather came to him spontaneously from his own environment as a child living in a country-side. His continuous watching of natural scenes around him developed into his mind a kind of intimacy with nature which led later to soul emersion that helped him to pass from a simple observer, who comes to look and enjoy the surface scene, to an expert who goes deeper into the details of these apparent scenes and even beyond what appears to occasional visitors. Charles Tennyson in his 'A Personal Memoir' quoted in *Studies in Tennyson* made it clear when he said that the accuracy and the originality of the nature –pictures as he called it are associated with 'a habit he had formed...' he illustrated his opinion with songs of trees in 'The Princess' which was derived during a walk through the New Forest in a strong breeze. (Tennyson Ed. 23, 24.)

His true love to nature encouraged him to draw fine nature paintings through his poems in a way made him distinguished in this field of art for he doesn't describe nature elements in normal and classical method; rather he adopted more personal and peculiar style to be distinguished in this field in his time. His method of description went beyond the classics by adopting more advanced and peculiar style based on

much care with minute details of the natural elements, to present clear and somehow live pictures, to make his poems more attractive to readers and especially to those who have a special sense for the aroma of the natural scenes, Robson in his essay, 'The Present Value of Tennyson' in *Studies in Tennyson* edited by Hallam Tennyson, rates this peculiarity as 'excellence' and gives, as an example, a line in 'Maud': 'A million emeralds break from the ruby-budded lime...' Robson exclaims 'who could look at a lime-tree again without relishing that?' (Tennyson Ed.51) Another example can be found in 'In Memoriam' when Tennyson talks on the sunflower: '...shining fair,/ Ray round with flames her disk of seed' (CI,5), Robson comments: 'In Memoriam alone a full of single lines which have that quality, in which Tennyson put into words with more delicate precision than we could ever find what we may have seen for ourselves.' Robson thinks that the precision of detail in Tennyson poetry 'could help police identification.' (Tennyson Ed.51,52.) The detailed description became as much accurate as that of the police identification of a crime.

He recodes attentively the sensation and takes out the suggestions and the similitudes. He takes the accurate notice of minor things of wild flower and the birds call. Lyall likens him to Victor Hugo, when he says; these two artists "sought to fix accurately the scene, and to translate the momentary sensation into accordance with the thought that it awakened" in us a "background or environment of human action." (124-125)

The scientific mind of the Victorian age influenced Tennyson to look at nature in a scientific analytical eye. "science natured a love for nature in some ways as intense, as anything that one can recognize in previous centuries, but on the other hand, by stressing the mechanical and chemical aspects of natural process, it took away the magic and left no room for spiritual direction." (Amin) He went far in his look of nature to study its laws. Moore talks about Tennyson's mind as 'inquisitive, acquisitive, analytical' and says, Tennyson loved "accuracy of detail to the minutest feature, and sought for a scientific reason for every natural phenomenon or process." (16-17):

Calm is the morn without a sound,
Calm as to suit a calmer grief,
And only through the faded leaf,
The chestnut pattering to the ground.

Then we have a most vivid picture, in eight lines of a storm in autumn: (23).

Norman Lockyer, and Winifred L. Lockyer. in their book *Tennyson as a Student and Poet of Nature*, presented detailed description of nature in Tennyson poetry. Tennyson looked at the sky above and observed stars of many colors or some of these stars have two sides, one more luminous than the other:

As tho'a star, in inmost heaven set,
Ev'n while we gaze on it,
Should slowly round his orb, and slowly grow
To a full face, there like a sun remain,...
(Eleanore, vol.1)

He talks about star eclipse in *Aylmer's Field*, and the celestial movement of the stars. The galaxy or Milky Way in *Epilogue*,

Tennyson thinks that the sun, like other stars has a movement in space:

The sun will run his orbit, and the Moon
Her circle. (Love and duty)

Sun is considered the giver of life and the definer of time:

Blow, our Sun is Mighty in his May
Blow, for our Sun is mightier day by day! (The
Coming of Arthur). (Lockyer, 45)

The noon of the day is personified as a knight with armor in 'Gareth and Lynette'. (Lockyer, 51)

He talks about the sun set over the sea and names it 'Ocean lane of fire' in 'The Voyage'. (Lockyer, 64)

When it comes to wind he speaks of various kinds, the south wind is warm, but the west wind is that which brings with it rain in *Harold*. The north wind is cold in 'The Passing of Arthur'.

Tennyson has been great lover of birds. He mentioned many kinds of them like the sparrow; chaffinch, robin, and hen swallow, and so on. In plant mentioned the insectivorous plants

He thinks that man and flowers have something in common. A man who is true at heart and little shifty in manners:

But as the water lily starts and slides
Upon the level in little puffs of wind,
Tho' anchor'd to the bottom, such is he. (The Princess)

Tennyson treated nature from scientific point of view when he gave scientific interpretation of the flaw and ebb in moony night. He says the tide water is controlled by the attraction of the moon:

A still salt pool, lock'd in with bars of sand,
Left on the shore; that hears all night
The plunging seas draw backward from the land
Their moon-led waters white. (The Palace of Art)

As an artist, Tennyson proved successful in drawing marvelous scenes. He uses artistic touches of his own to make the natural scenes in words look alive in his poems. He makes great Nature pictures of the sea, sky, sunset, sunrise, and clouds. Spring of all seasons of the years he loved and enjoyed most:

When rosy plumelets tuft the larch,
And rarely pipes the mounted thrush,
Or underneath the barren bush
Flits by the sea-blue bird of March... (Lockyer, 25)

Spring in the eyes of the poet is not less than the queen of nature with all its beautiful dress, to whom 'all animated Nature does homage.'

First the ground-flame of the crocus breaks the mould...

Wavers on her thin stem the snowdrop cold... (Lockyer, 25)

He draws fantastic pictures to the plants, flowers, trees, corns, grass, and all the fruits of the earth. Moore says that he enumerated descriptions of more than seventy species in his poems.(29)

His favorite flowers were, for color, the rose, lily, crocus, and daffodil; and for perfume, the violet, woodbine, and Jessamine as-

Tho' I circle in the grain

Five hundred rings of years, etc.

According to Moore, the most successful descriptive scenes which vividly portrayed, always in strict keeping with the subject, scene, or action of the poem, were the clouds at sunrise and sunset, and pictures of Spain, Portugal, Greece, Crete, and the Mediterranean Coast. The most favorite descriptive lines to Tennyson were these:

The league-long roller thundering on the reef,
Universal ocean softly washing all her warless isles.(quoted, 40)

Moods of nature:

Tennyson carved nature in poems to sympathize with all its creatures in the days of bad luck. In the 'Dying Swan', for example nature laments the death of a bird. Moore says the 'gloom of the cloudy sky and the dreary scenery are skillfully made to enhance and set in relief the pathos of the swan-song':

The plain was grassy, wild, and bare,
Wide, wild, and open to the air,
Which had built up everywhere
An under-roof of doleful grey.
With an inner voice the river ran
Adown it floated a dying swan,
And loudly did lament.

It was the middle of the day.

Ever the weary wind went on

And took the reed tops as it went...(quoted.10.)

The sympathy of nature goes also to man. In times of depression, it offers refuge to man who finds none but nature to embrace him and grants him all kinds of support and compassion it gives him cheerful moments in times of misfortune, and in days of depression. In the 'Two Voices' :

And forth into the fields I went,

And Nature's living motion lent

The pulse of hope to discontent...(quoted. 21.)

A true friendship is made between man and nature. Each fills in love with the other. When the fair Olivia embraces the bole, the oak says:

I wish'd myself the fair young beech

That here beside me stand,
That bound me, clasping each in each,
She might have locked her hands.

The favorable quality of nature is applied to man in terms of beauty and innocence. In 'The Princess' the pretty Lilia is compared to a rose:

Petulant she spoke, and at herself she laughed,
A rosebud set with little willful thorns
And sweet as English air could make her, she.
(quoted.31.)

Nature is subservient to human emotion :

Although Tennyson draws nature with minuteness of details and accuracy of observation. He, as a skilful critic, could paint the scenery with colors of his own choice in an attempt to make it subservient to human emotion and help interpret human moods. In 'Maud', the poem opens: 'I hate the dreadful hollow behind the little wood'. Nature in this little wood is associated not with peace this time but with the dreadful death and bloodshed. It is the place where the father of the hero died that witnessed all scenes of terrible grief. The speaker here makes nature reflect his unhappy mood. The Little Wood turns to a place for anarchy and moral disorder:

For Nature is one with rapine, a harm no preacher can heal;

The mayfly is torn by the swallow, the sparrow speared by the shrike,

And the whole little wood where I sit is a world of plunder and prey, (Maud)

The Little Wood turns to be a symbol for the world, world of money and business, dominated by 'lust of gain, in the spirit of Cain.'(Priestely,111-112) It is a world governed by savage laws; 'kill or be killed' which is totally different from the natural out look of the garden as a place for order, love, courage, and purity:

Maud has a garden of roses

And lilies fair on a lawn;

A lion ramps at the top,

he is claspt by the passion-flower. . (quoted in Priestely,111)

The buzz of the flies, the chirp of sparrow, the moaning of the wind in 'Mariana' all suggest monotonous life. Tennyson employs nature poetry once again to serve his purpose to highlight the subject of man as he endeavors to survive in this world.(Kissane 54)

Once again, he is close to his country common fate where the mariners work hard in the sea and by the end the day not to find pleasure at home but to experience loneliness when they discover those who love them most deserted them. Here and in many other

poems Tennyson excels in expressing the internal desolation and man's silent remorse.

Yet Blooms claims, in his attempting to give new meanings to nature, Tennyson went to spiritualize nature in order to make it subservient to the needs of human soul and become symbolic of human moods and passions.

Blooms continues "Tennyson has had at his service an exquisitely graduated temperament, varying in almost limited less range of complex moods, nearly every one of which may be shared by a sensitive reader." (Blooms)

Gates thinks Tennyson effort was to fuse nature with emotion and unite matter with spirit, (77) letting his imagination guide him through the beautiful forms of nature till he finds a fitting symbol.

The scientific spirit of his age compelled him to recognize the literal meaning of facts of nature as interpreted by the analytic, positive mind of his day and generation.

Gates suggests that Tennyson's "poems are studies of landscape as landscape is seen through an atmosphere determined by feeling. Each poem owes its power to the congruity of its details, to the imaginative unity that pervades it and subdues every minutest circumstance of colour and light and shade and motion till they all breathe out inevitable chord of feeling. The blinding light and the staffing heat of landscapes in 'Mariana in the South' seems the very evolution of defeated passion; in the other 'Mariana' the details of the 'lonely moated-plots to the glomming flats' and 'dark fens' all image Mariana's deadly languor and desolation.

Gates thinks that the poems are a study in black of a passion of melancholy and a passion of tenderness and devotion (P.80). In 'Ode to Memory' Tennyson shows the freshness and the brilliancy of the impressions of youth (P.83). In 'Maud', this suffusion of nature with passion is noticeable. (P.84) in 'Enoch Arden' nature is subdued to passions of moment:

No sail from day, but every day
The sunrise broken into scarlet shafts
Among the palm and ferns and precipices;

Nature's Indifference to man:

Nature is presented in many poems as a deaf creature, void of feelings, but rather selfish having no care for any human being. This is in 'Oonon', the lady here in this poem suffers from ignorance; she was deserted by her husband Paris and went to seek help from nature; she addresses the valleys, the mountain, the river on hope to help her find her deserted husband but in vain:

".....the clov'n ravine
In cataract after cataract of the sea.
Behind the valley topmost Gargarus." (Eron)

Cummings, another commentator, thinks that nature has its own laws and may not necessarily go in accordance with that of human beings. He claims that nature functions on its own rhythms what ever the results. He says, as examples, temperature plummets just when a poor family runs out of fuel. The sun may shine and the bird may sing in the middle of the battle; and the sea is calm, careless of the many tragedies occurring in every day man's life. Tennyson laments this nature indifference to mankind in 'Break, Break, Break' and many other poems.

Tennyson sees in nature some important facts teaching a religious lesson. Through nature Tennyson unveils some of his own philosophy. To him nature is changeable so as man's life. The face of nature is subject to change through its seasons; in winter, celebration of new birth, in spring green and happy, in summer busy and comfortable, in autumn old age and death; so as man, in his life cycle, goes from birth, childhood, boyhood, youth, and manhood, and finally to death. The death of a tree gives chance to new seeds to grow. Similarly, the death of a man gives chance to new born baby. Man's body turns into earth while his soul begins new life in heaven. Life is like the alternation of light and dark as the day comes after night and so on:

But when those others, one by one,
Withdrew themselves from me and night,
And in the house light after light
Went out, and I was all alone,
A hunger seized my heart, I read
Of that glad year which once had been,
In those fallen leaves which kept their green,
The noble letters of the dead. (section 95, lines: 17-24)

However, it is the union of day and night, compared to the union of life and death, which leads to rebirth or the coming again of the 'boundless day'. (Eron)

The pessimistic views of nature:

We note the dramatic change in the poets views of nature. Now we here something little bit different from what has been told about nature. Nature becomes a sort of murderer, a kind of killer; it is 'red in tooth and claw/ with shriek'd against his creed. It is the nature which killed his faithful friend Hallam in 'In Memoriam', and filled him with grief. Nature is attached with deception and is the unlawful mother who dear kills her sons. He recalls the dinosaurs that once have been a friend with nature, but deceived and killed by it. Tennyson thinks that the human being may not have a deferent end; he will be slaughtered and have a similar dreadful fate.

Lopez claims that nature may not be the source of imagination as it was with other poets. Nature to Tennyson at sometimes appeared to be a source of grief and anger, failed to evoke pretty images, and

considered to be a source of a negative element in human life.

Personification of nature:

Nature is personified as a woman, a female who doesn't care for human life; she is like a wild animal armed with strong teeth to kill. She doesn't have any kind of mercy but to attack and kill by her 'iron' claws. It holds no excuse but to have man killed and his body destroyed, and turned into dust and finally to be thrown in the wide desert. (Peltason, 78)

Nature is portrayed as powerful and arbitrary 'I bring to life, I bring to death'; careless of man and his suffering:

'So careful of the type?' but no.
From scarp & egrace'd cliff and quarried stone
She cries, 'a thousand types are gone;
I care for nothing, all shall go.
'Thou makest thine appeal to me:
I bring to life, I bring to death;
The spirit does but mean the breath;
I know no more.' (In Memoriam 56,1-8.)

The above lines serve as an echo of Hallam's sudden death where the poet becomes helpless crashed and beaten by nature. (Stevenson)

Tennyson becomes so suspicious towards nature which plays a destructive role against a weak man who struggles for survival. Man's fate is to suffer. Man is like the yew tree living on the grave; its roots are pushed deep and entangled with the corpses of the dead human bodies. (Nature Imagery in Victorian Web) To Tennyson the Yew tree fails to offer any kind of help to the dead, since it is dead; the dead cannot help the dead. Nature is dead as the dead body of human being, helpless and useless. The old yew "which grapeset / that name the underlying dead / thy fibers net the dreamless head, / thy roots are entangled about the bones and" (2. 1-4). the tree is seen as an 'extension of the grave it grows on the roots and entangled around the dead bones and are as dead as the 'skull of the person' unable to help.

Tennyson holds a melancholic vision of nature based on selection; the stronger of every species kills the weak and the survivors have to adopt themselves to the new environment. According to this thought, Tennyson applies Darwin's theory of evolution, the survival for the fittest.

Lopez gives justification to these sardonic views:

"The melancholic vision of Tennyson may come from firstly, the sadness suffered in his childhood and youth being his father disinherited and affected by mental illness, something that seems to be common in Tennyson's family, and that made him live very hard situation. And secondly, it comes from the grief that the incomprehensible fact of his young friend's death brought to him." (Lopez)

Another commentator, Stevenson, gives more interpretation regarding Tennyson's above views: "Tennyson, confused by the death of his close friend Ar. Hallam, can find no gentleness in a world which caused such pain, crashed and bewildered his faith." (32)

A question may be raised here in this context whether the poet was subjective or objective in his expressions about nature. To a reviewer of the Victorian poetry, the poet Tennyson could express his own feelings but within the general context of his Victorian outlook. Tennyson, as a poet, is the creation of his own environment, he is in thoughts the echo of his own society. Every body up to this monument may share him his feelings and may hold the same views of nature as he goes from bad to good and vice versa.

Laws of nature strengthen a belief in God:

Nature leads the poet to strengthen his belief in God. Nature is not God but it is part of that big creation that grows to be powerful and fearful being not governed by the laws of justice. Man is a vulnerable creature, and nature with its savage laws can bring distraction to him. In this case man has to go and complain to God, and seek refuge in God's power. A commentator thinks that this 'fictionalization of nature as a phantasmal female form explains the instability of the speaker's beliefs as he flips so fluidly from trusty nature to trusting God.' Quoted: (Paltason)

In many of his poems, Tennyson demonstrates how nature can 'lead up to God' and helps man to be acquainted with God attributes. The last section of 'In Memoriam' works as a guide to help man know that everything in nature is but God's creation; and everything takes man closer to understand God, the Creator of everything. A critic thinks that 'The more man knows nature and its laws, the more he comes to understand his Maker.' Quoted: (Paltason)

Conclusion

Thus, we have seen through the above study how Tennyson could successfully draw vivid nature scenes in many of his poems, and how he looked at these scenes with the critical and analytical eye of a skillful expert reflecting his moods and his inner feelings. In fact Tennyson as a painter adds to these scenes colors of his own to make them speak his moment; they are painted in white when he is happy and relaxed; and painted in black when he is sad.

At one moment he loves nature and hates it at another. He discovers that nature is moody and careless of man's needs. Sometimes it is helpful sometimes it isn't; some times it is friendly and other times time is hard and unexpected. Through his poetical scenes of nature Tennyson explores the depth of man to establish a kind of comparison between nature and man. Nature stands for all varied behaviors of human beings; and at

the same time it is as mortal as man. It shares with man the same cycle life; and moves from strength and glory to weakness and fall; from Spring to Autumn so as man from youth to old age and death. Tennyson rediscovers through his constant observation of nature the existence of almighty God, the Creator of all including nature and man, the only One to whom man must submit and seek help.

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