

**ALFRED TENNYSON'S MYTHICAL POEMS- *OENONE* AND
TITHONUS:
A PORTRAYAL OF TWO SUICIDALLY DEPRESSED CHARACTERS**

Md. Tariqul Alam

M.Phil (Fellow)

Assistant Professor of English

Britannia University, Cumilla, Bangladesh



Abstract

Alfred Lord Tennyson (6 August, 1809-6 October 1892) was the leading poet and poet laureate of Great Britain and Ireland during much of Queen Victoria's reign in the Victorian age who remains one of the most renowned poets in the English language and among the most frequently quoted writers. He used a wide range of subject matter ranging from medieval legends to classical myths and domestic situations to observations of nature. Actually, myths and legends have always been used in framing the artistic structure of literary works of Alfred Tennyson. In this connection, his poems *Oenone* and *Tithonus* are no exception. These two poems are very popular mythical and legendary poems where Alfred Lord Tennyson presents two contradictory states of human nature. Using classical and mythical characters and expressing contemporary mood and ideology is one of the main characteristics of Lord Alfred Tennyson's poetry. In many of his poems, it is noteworthy that he has portrayed the mood of loneliness, depression and frustration drawing classical characters from mythology and thus creates a sensational, horrific and thought-provoking effect in the mind of the general readers and literature lovers as well. Basically, this paper is an attempt to review two of the lovesick mythological characters who are suicidally depressed in Tennyson's poems - *Oenone* and *Tithonus*. The paper will also briefly discuss the mythical background of the two characters, their faults and decisions etc. to denote moral messages to the modern readers.

Keywords:

Mythological characters, Oenone, Tithonus, Suicidally depressed, Mythology, Medieval Legend, Frustration, Alfred Tennyson, Victorian age, Poet laureate

Introduction

Alfred Tennyson is the leading luminary in the history of English literature. He is a versatile genius in expressing and upholding the mythical characters and mythology. Like many other, English poets Tennyson has often used mythical and legendary characters as spokesmen for his own attitude and mood. Tennyson draws characters from the myths and legends but adopts them in his own way to universalize the inner mood and spirit of such characters. It is also remarkable that most of Tennyson's protagonists are frustrated, sorrowful and mentally depressed. It is found that Tiresias, Oenone, the Lady of Shalott and the hero of *Locksley Hall* are lonely; Ulysses cannot adjust himself with his social life and Tithonus roams like a shadow and lives under a tragic course. In this regard, it may be said that such projection of depressed and lonely moods are a regeneration of Tennyson's own despair and loneliness. Stephen remarks, "Tennyson was a Victorian through and through". As a representative poet of Victorian age Tennyson has created such moods and themes in his poetry that have similar spirit and acceptance in that age. Regarding the use of myth and legends in the works of Tennyson, Ahmad opines, "He is much successful in including Greek and Roman mythology as the basis of his poetry. His purpose is to give some universal philosophies through the speeches of his characters".

Although many of Tennyson's early poems are based on classical myths and denote the mood of depression, this paper will focus only on two in particular – *Oenone* and *Tithonus* in which two suicidally depressed characters express their loneliness, frustration and realization. In both of the poems - *Oenone* and *Tithonus*, the protagonists were lovesick and once enjoyed their romantic life with their partners. But now things gone changed, *Oenone* has lost her lover *Paris* who has gone to *Helen of Sparta* deserting her. In such a situation, *Oenone* is angry and depressed and she is expressing her agony to *Mother Ida*. Almost the same love case has been sketched in the poem *Tithonus*, where the protagonist *Tithonus*, a mortal human being was in love with *Eos (Aurora)*, the goddess of dawn. Then out of emotion, she gifted him immortality without perpetual youth. However, with the passage of time, the gift of immortality turns into a curse for *Tithonus*. He has become a decrepit old shadow, cannot die and now he is crying for death. Tennyson has agreeably juxtaposed the myths with his inner mood and universalized the agony, appeal and frustration of the two depressed souls through the two classical characters, *Oenone* and *Tithonus*.

Research Methodology

The study follows a qualitative research methodology where both the secondary sources and personal experience of the author are used to carry out the research work. We also studied different articles and journals. Again our eminent colleagues and specialists also have helped us with certain modalities so that we have successfully finished the entire paper. Their qualitative and research-oriented discussion and guidelines were of immense benefit to us and we also took much interest in visiting the website for updated information for this purpose.

Limitations of the study:

This study suffers from a number of problems. The number of research on this subject matter was very few. There might have some limitations in information collection for the shortage of time. The research found the Lack of the samples as well as Lack of sufficient secondary online data. To do this study the researcher had limited books and resources regarding the subject.

Literature Review and Critical Discussion**Mythological Background of *Oenone* and *Tithonus*:**

About the tragic story of *Oenone*, it is known that Paris (Alexander) was the chosen lover of Oenone, daughter of the river Oeneus, a fountain-nymph. She had been taught the art of prophecy by Rhea, and that of medicine by Apollo while he was acting as Laomedon's herdsman. Paris and Oenone used to herd their flocks and hunt together. They lived together at Ida as husband-wife. Paris was so much in love with her that he swore that he would never desert her. However, later on Paris betrayed her trust, abandoned her and sailed to kidnap Helen, the queen of Sparta. Oenone failed to dissuade Paris from the dangerous journey to Helen. However, at the departure, she suggested Paris that if ever he might be wounded, he might come back to her as only she (Oenone) could heal him (Grave, 385).

About the myth of Oenone and Paris it is documented by Roman and Monica (386):

Paris abandoned his lover, the nymph Oenone. Oenone had foreseen the tragic consequences of Paris's pursuit of Helen and attempted to persuade him to remain in Troy. Having accepted his resolution to leave, Oenone promised to heal Paris of his injuries. She foresaw that she alone could do so.

There is an extended story too about Oenone and Paris. In *Trojan War*, Paris was mortally injured by the arrow of Philoctetes. About this story Grave mentions:

That night the Trojans carried him to Mount Ida, where he begged his former mistress, the nymph Oenone, to heal him; from an inveterate hatred of Helen, however, she cruelly shook her head and he was brought back to die. Presently Oenone relented, and ran to Troy with a basketful of healing drugs, but found him already dead. In a frenzy of grief, she leapt from the walls, or hanged herself, or burned herself to death on his pyre- no one remembers which. (688-689).

About the extended myth, Roman and Monica (386) mention that Paris was wounded during the war by the poison-tipped arrows of Philoctetes. He appealed to Oenone, but the nymph refused to nurse him for his betrayal. Oenone repented, but too late; by then, Paris had died from his wounds. In grief, Oenone took her own life, by either hanging herself or flinging

herself on Paris's funeral pyre. There is also a saying that Paris had an elder son by Oenone, named Corythus, whom, in jealousy of Helen, Oenone sent to guide the avenging Greeks to Troy.

About the myth of the character of Tithonus, it is known that he is a tragic human character with a strange fate. He was a Trojan by birth, the son of King Laomedon of Troy by a water nymph named Strymo. He had a love affair with Eos (Eos is known in Roman mythology as Aurora), the goddess of dawn. In Greek mythology, Eos is a Greek personification of dawn and she is the daughter of the Titans Hyperion and Theia, sister of Helios (god of the Sun) and Selene (goddess of the Moon). The origin of the myth is *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*:

So also golden-throned Eos rapt away Tithonus who was of your race and like the deathless gods. And she went to ask the dark-clouded Son of Cronus that he should be deathless and live eternally, and Zeus bowed his head to her prayer and fulfilled her desire. Too simple was queenly Eos: she thought not in her heart to ask youth for him But when loathsome old age pressed full upon him, and he could not move nor lift his limbs, this seemed to her in her heart the best counsel: she laid him in a room and put to the shining doors. There he babbles endlessly. (Evelyn-White, 219-240).

In the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, Eos is said to have become so enamoured of Tithonus (son of King Laomedon of Troy) that she carried him away to be her husband. At her request, Zeus bestowed immortality on Tithonus, but since she had neglected to ask for eternal youth as well, he grew ever older until he literally shrank away. Finally, he disappeared, leaving behind only his voice. Eos and Tithonus had two sons, Emathion and Memnon. According to Homer, Eos fell in love with several mortals (Roman and Monica, 156).

The myth of Eos and Tithonus is exposed in the *Iliad also*. Regarding their myth, Hamilton mentions:

Tithonus himself had a strange fate. Aurora asked Zeus to make him immortal and agreed, but she had not thought to ask also that he should remain young. So it came to pass that he grew old, but could not die. Helpless at last, unable to move hand or foot, he prayed for death, but there was no release for him. He must live on forever, with old age forever pressing upon him more and more. At last in pity the goddess laid him in a room and left him, shutting the door. There he babbled endlessly. (358-359).

There is an also story that he shrank and shrank in size until at last Aurora with a feeling for the natural fitness of things turned him into the skinny and noisy grasshopper.

Tennyson's Portraiture of two suicidally depressed Characters in his poems :***Oenone and Tithonus*****Oenone :**

Oenone is the first of Tennyson's poems based on classical myth and it is one of Tennyson's dramatic monologues in the form of a complaint from Oenone to Mother Ida. Hallam points out that Tennyson himself notes that the setting of the poem derives from the landscape of the Valley of Caerteret which he visited with Hallam in the summer of 1830, and where the poem was begun (qt. in Cronin, 229). In this poem, Oenone is so lonely and lamenting. The poem starts with a brief description of Ida valley where mournful Oenone begins her lament addressing mother Ida.

She laments –

*O' mother Ida, many –fountains Ida,
Dear mother Ida, harken ere I d
Hear me, O earth, hear me, O hills, O caves*

[L: 33-36]

She finds all the natural environment and elements calm and quiet. The grasshopper, lizard and cicada are sleeping but she alone is awake and suffering. She recalls the moment when handsome but evil hearted Paris came to her leading a jet-black goat white –horned, white–hooved. That time she was sitting alone; Paris had put on a leopard skin on his shoulder and looked nice with his sunny hair. Paris smiled at her and she fell in love.

Later on, Oenone came to know about the Golden Apple that Eris had thrown down to Paris so that he can play the role of judge. She describes the arrival of the three Goddess (three claimants of the Golden Apple) - Hera, Pallas (Athena) and Aphrodite. She opines that Paris of course should have chosen wisdom offered by Pallas than the two gifts, especially the offer of Aphrodite -The fairest and most loving wife in Greece.

She asks mother Ida whether she is not fair enough to conquer the attention of Paris. She recalls the thousand times complement of Paris about her fairness. She thinks that she is obviously fair and lovely. Even only the day before, a wild and wanton leopard stood fascinated by her beauty.

*Fairest- why fairest wife? Am I not fair?
My love hath told me so a thousand times.
Methinks I must be fair, for yesterday,
When I pass by , a wild and wanton pard,
Eyed like the evening star, with playful tail
Crouch'd fawning in the weed.*

[L: 195-199]

Oenone continued her lament, recalls the rosy memories with Paris in the green valley and under the green hill. She would not live any longer. She compares her sufferings with those of other unhappy people of the world and thinks that her sufferings are more acute than those of others. So, she would not live anymore and expects death to close her eyes.

In the concluding lines, Oenone's lament takes a sudden turn, from lament to anger. She becomes furious and decides that she would not die alone. She decides to have her revenge and would not give birth to the child conceived by her union with Paris as such a child would be unblest and would only irritate her reminding the painful memory of evil-hearted Paris. She would rise and go to Troy to have a talk with wild Cassandra who had been seeing a fire dancing before her and hearing the sound of armed men. Oenone does not know exactly what the meanings of Cassandra's vision are but surely these ill omens are for Paris and Helen and such would burn all earth.

Tithonus:

The poem *Tithonus* was composed in 1833 shortly after Arther Henry Hallam's death. Tennyson developed the idea for such a poem on these themes of age and mortality after hearing a remark from his fiancé, Emily Sellwood. Sellwood lamented that none of the Tennysons ever die unlike the Hallams (SparkNotes Editors). Tennyson said of "Tithonus," "It was originally a pendant to the 'Ulysses' in my former volumes, and I wanted Smith to insert a note of mine, to the editor stating this, and how long ago it had been written" (459). Regarding the themes of the poem Greene (294) remarks that "Tithonus" is a poem about defeat and resignation, about the relationship between beauty and mortality, perhaps also about the callousness of destiny and the arrogance of the gods.

Unlike the original myth, the poem is a dramatic monologue in blank verse from the point of view of Tithonus. In this poem, Tithonus who once requested and later on got the gift of immortality from God appeals to Aurora to let him go back to his human existence on earth so that he may die like other creatures. To him, life itself has become a burden and Tithonus sees that everything of the world – the woods, the clouds, man and the swan meet their end after a certain period. He is only in cruel immortality. He finds himself 'a white-hair'd shadow roaming like a dream'. So in the mood of extreme sorrow Tithonus laments:

*The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
The vapours weep their burden to the ground,
A man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,
And after many a summer dies the swan.
Me only cruel immortality.*

[L:1-5]

He recalls his glorious youth and beauty that was peerless in the world and won the favour of the goddess, Aurora. He also recalls the moment of his foolish desire for immortality to Aurora; Aurora's agreement with a smile, etc. He speaks of the passion and the kisses that he used to receive from her which were sweeter than the half-opened buds of April. The sweet and lovely words that she used to whisper in his ears were sweet like the song of Apollo while Ilion like a mist rose into the tower. But alas! Old age has slowly turned him beyond recognition. The passivity of Tithonus is not simply a result of old age; it is apparently a lifelong habit (Ward, 312).

Now he sees departing on her daily journey and shedding tears on his cheek and such tears make him tremble lest saying learnt in days far-offs, on that dark earth, be true? "The Gods themselves cannot recall their gifts". Her tear shows her helplessness that she is unable to rescue Tithonus from his misery (immortality).

Therefore, Tithonus does not want to stay anymore in Aurora's home, in the East. They have nothing, even no point in living together. They are now dissimilar in their position of love. For Tithonus every day brings only the painful renewal of an unwelcome existence. He is jealous of seeing the happy men who have the power to die and to those who lie dead in their grave. He laments and appeals to Aurora to release him and send him to the earth so that he can die like a human.

*Of happy men that have the power to die,
And grassy barrows of the happier dead.
Release me, and restore me to the ground;*

[L: 70-73]

In the poems, Tennyson has brought several changes in the story and theme. In the mythological story, Aurora asks for the immortality for Tithonus but here it is Tithonus who requested the goddess Aurora, and in myth, Zeus grants immortality for Tithonus but in the poem, Aurora confess the gift upon him (Tithonus). Thus, the theme of the Tennyson's poem is quite different from the mythical theme. In Greek classical myth Tithonus has been turned into a grasshopper finally but in Tennyson's poetry, he is a white shadow, cannot move and cries for death. Here, therefore the theme is contrasted between youth and age, and love and death.

Comparative Study:

In a comparative study, it is found that both of the poems –*Oenone* and *Tithonus* are dramatic monologues in form. In *Oenone* the speaker is a lovesick and depressed girl and in *Tithonus* the speaker is an aged male character who has been reduced to a 'white-haired shadow'. It is marked that the pain of Oenone is common as love and separation is the

frequent incident in the day-to-day affairs, but the pain and urge of Tithonus are strange and grave as there is no remedy of the perpetual immortality of a mortal human being without everlasting youth. Here Oenone is crying not for her own fault but for the loose character of Paris who has broken her heart for another girl, Helen. On the contrary, Tithonus is repenting as he has broken the natural order welcoming immortality for himself out of emotion. Here, he himself is responsible not his beloved Aurora. In this regard, the subject matter of *Oenone* is love and rejection while in *Tithonus* the subject matter is the consequence of breaking the natural order.

In *Oenone*, the protagonist is revengeful and she is ready to have her revenge. She declares that she will not bring the love child of Paris in the world as such a child will only increase her pain. She is determined to meet wild Cassandra to know the downfall of Paris. On the other hand, Tithonus is envious of men who have the power to die. He is not revengeful like Oenone. He blames no one but himself and his destiny. He cries to the goddess to release him so that he can die like an average human, 'Let me go: take back thy gift'.

Tennyson's mastery lies in the blending of moral lesson with such poems. In *Oenone* the moral messages come from the suggestions of Pallas the goddess of wisdom. She advises Paris that a man can attain true sovereign power only through self-reverence, self-knowledge and self-control. She adds that power by itself has no meaning, and power would automatically come to the man who lives a systematic life. The great reward is to live an honest and noble life, regardless of the consequences. One should follow the right path for its own sake. In *Tithonus*, the moral messages come from the realization of the protagonist who asks –

Why should a man desire in any way

To vary from the kindly race of man,

Or pass beyond the goal of the ordinance

Where all should pause, as in most meet for all?

[L: 28-31]

Tithonus realizes that it is unjust for a human being to desire something that violates the natural race of human. If death is the destiny of mortal human, then why should a man desire for immortality? He realizes that in any condition or out of temptation none should break the natural law or accept anything that is against the average course of life.

The reason for Oenone's sufferings is, of course, her blind and sensual love for Paris. In this poem, the common 'love and rejection' theme has been intensified through the classical characters of Oenone. Apart from this theme, the poem denotes three values or principles for a human being. Here Tennyson has presented such values or principles as temptations. Paris represents the human symbol, Hera stands for power, Athena signifies wisdom and Aphrodite symbolizes sensual pleasure and physical beauty. In this poem, Tennyson has nicely

expressed his view what should be the highest choice in life with the speech of Pallas -*Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control, these three alone lead life to sovereign power.* Besides, Tennyson has expressed the consequences of running after the sensual pleasure and physical beauty by giving an example of Oenone's lovesickness to Paris for his fair look and the example of Paris's fascination to Helen for her physical beauty.

Though the source of the suffering of Tithonus is his blind and emotional love affair with the goddess Aurora, the theme of the poem criticizes the unnatural wishes of a human. It suggests men should not violate the ordinary rules of human life. One must be governed by the natural ordinances that rule the universe and one's desire for immortality is a foolish demand. In addition, it suggests that unequal relationship brings nothing but frustration. Side by side it also tells that human life is only precious as it can be lost at any moment. Man must be careful what he wishes and expects for himself. Therefore, in both of the poems one philosophy is common that is if in making a crucial decision a man mistakes, he has to pay a lot.

Conclusion:

Tennyson has hardly used any classical character without blending it with modern concepts or themes. He turns back towards ancient mythical characters not only for their artistic beauty but also for thematic purposes. Certainly, a modern reader will be inspired with the beauty of characterization of such mythical and legendary protagonists. Thus, Oenone and Tithonus - two suicidally depressed characters incorporates various ethical and universal messages. Unlike the classical myth, here the character Oenone represents the consequences of her blind and sensual love. Accordingly, Tithonus contributes the moral lesson that in any condition one should not violate the natural order and law. Thus, Tennyson's two mythical characters serve the purposes of literal, artistic and philosophical quests of the readers of all ages.

References:

- Ahmad, Jamal. "Myths and Legends in the Literary Works of Lord Alfred Tennyson." *Ars Artium: An International Peer Reviewed-cum-Refereed Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 5, 2017, p.67. www.arsartium.org/pdf/2017/10.%20Jamal%20Ahmad.pdf.
- Cronin, Richard. "'Oenone' and Apostolic Politics: 1830-1832." *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 30, no. 3/4, 1992, p. 229. *JSTOR*, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40002466.

- Evelyn-White, Hugh Gerard, translator. *Homeric Hymns*. Harvard UP, William Heinemann, 1914, pp. 219-240. www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=HH%205.
- Grave, Robert. *Greek Myth*. Cassel & Company, 1995, p. 632, pp. 688-689. Print.
- Greene, Michael E. "Tennyson's 'Gray Shadow, Once a Man': Erotic Imagery and Dramatic Structure in 'Tithonus.'" *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1980, p. 294. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40002933.
- Hamilton, Edith. *Mythology*. Mentor book, New York 22, 1963, pp. 358-359. Print.
- Roman, Luke and Roman, Monica. *Encyclopedia of Greek and Roman Mythology*. New York, NY 10001. 2010, p. 156, 386. Print.
- Stephen, Martin. *English Literature*, 3rd ed., Pearson Education Limited, England. 2000, p. 246. Print.
- SparkNotes Editors. "SparkNote on Tennyson's Poetry." SparkNotes. SparkNotes LLC.
- 2002. www.sparknotes.com/poetry/tennyson/citing/.
- Tennyson, Hallam. *Tennyson: A Memoir*. London, 1898, p. 459. Print.
- Penguin. *Tennyson: Selected Poetry*. London, 1985. Print.
- Ward, Arthur D. "'Ulysses' and 'Tithonus': Tunnel-Vision and Idle Tears." *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 12, no. 4, 1974, p. 312. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40001696.