

Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "Tithonus": An Analysis

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Introduction: Alfred Lord Tennyson's "Tithonus", written in 1833 and published in 1859, stands as one of the most poignant explorations of the human condition in Victorian poetry. Conceived as a pendant or companion piece to "Ulysses", the poem provides a somber contrast to the former's restless quest for life. While "Ulysses" celebrates the drive to "strive, to seek, to find", "Tithonus" examines the "cruel immortality" that results when human desires clash with the natural order. Through the expert use of Greek myth and the dramatic monologue, Tennyson transforms a classical tale into a universal meditation on aging, death, and the "goal of ordinance".

The Use of Myth: The poem is grounded in the Greek myth of Tithonus of Troy and Eos (Aurora), the goddess of the dawn. In the traditional myth, Eos kidnaps the mortal Tithonus and asks Zeus to grant him eternal life, but she forgets to ask for eternal youth. Tennyson subtly adapts this myth by making Tithonus himself the one who requested the boon, driven by his youthful pride and a desire to be forever admired by the goddess.

The myth serves as a vehicle to explore the unintended consequences of missing an essential technicality. Tennyson highlights the tragic contrast between immortal age beside immortal youth. While Aurora rejuvenates every morning- her "dim curls kindle into sunny rings"- Tithonus remains a "Gray shadow", withering away without the release of death. This mythological framework allows Tennyson to critique the human flaw of fearing death, suggesting that mortality is actually a "kindly" destiny that humans should not seek to bypass.

Myth and the Dramatic Monologue: Tennyson utilises the dramatic monologue to give a direct, intimate voice to this mythological figure. Spoken by Tithonus to Eos at the eastern edge of the world, the monologue captures his absolute passivity. Unlike Ulysses, who uses his voice to rally his men, Tithonus uses his to plead for release: "Let me go: take back thy gift".

The poem's structure-seven stanzas in blank verse-reflects the "unnatural combination" of the mortal and the divine. The monologue reveals the psychological fragmentation of a man trapped between two worlds; he remembers his past life "as if from another life or as another man". This technique allows the reader to experience Tithonus's linear decay against the goddess's circular, repetitive cycle of dawn.

Critical Appreciation: Critically, "Tithonus" is a masterpiece of imagery and tone. While T.S. Eliot once criticised Tennyson for a "dissociation of sensibility", the poem successfully captures the "innate, most natural fear" of aging. The contrast between the "decaying" woods and the "happy men that have the power to die" elevates death to a desired state. Tennyson suggests that those who accept their "natural end" live a more authentic and perhaps happier life. The poem ultimately serves as a "crisis lyric", where the crisis is not the approach of death, but its absence.

Conclusion: In "Tithonus" Tennyson uses the ancient myth to provide a profound commentary on the Victorian anxiety regarding time and loss. By connecting the myth to the dramatic monologue, he invites the reader to sympathise with a man who has passed "beyond the goal of ordinance". The poem concludes that death is not a foe to be conquered, but a necessary part of the natural cycle, reminding us that we are "happy mortals" precisely because we possess the power to die.