

Tennyson's Dramatic Monologues As Poetic Texts

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Introduction

Though he excels at writing lyric poems , Tennyson's poetry contrives a strong dramatic element . Since the publication of " Poems Chiefly Lyrical " in 1830 in which he informs his lyrics his own thoughts and feelings so poignantly , Tennyson's poetic intuition craves for magic selection of words , soft music of his verse , splendid imagery and the perfection of metre and rhyme . Nonetheless , the Victorian poet treads the path of drama to express his conceptual and aesthetic vision . Not only that , but Tennyson is looked at as the poet in whose texts the weariness and the doubts of the age are encoded .

This study proceeds on the hypothesis that the linguistic strata or the " formal levels " , in terms of Halliday's Functional Linguistics , help the poet build up the ideational picture of the world . Phonological , syntactic and semantic levels are the elements of design accessible to the poet .

The aim of this study is to show how Tennyson's dramatic monologues function as a vehicle for the poet's world-view . Two dramatic monologues by Tennyson will be analyzed from the standpoint of Stylistic Criticism .

Dramatic Monologue as a Critical Term

There is a general consensus among critics that a dramatic monologue is a poem in which a single speaker who is not the poet utters the entire poem at a critical moment . The speaker has a listener within the poem , but we too are his/her listener , and we learn about the speaker's character from what the speaker says (Abrams , 1957 : 25-6) . The dramatic monologue, in other words is a poem that reveals a " soul in action " through the speech of one character in a dramatic situation .

In this light , it is plausible to identify the main traits of this distinctive literary term as follows : (i) the dramatic monologue focuses upon the creation of a dramatic character, not the voice of the poet , but " " " ventriloquized character " which is called a "persona " , (ii) there is a sort of exchange between the principal character and a listener or an audience . In other words , the " I " and " you " of the piece correspond to the dramatic persona of a play .(5) The human characteristics of the addressee may be revealed by and through

the verbal utterances of the dramatic character and (iii) the whole poetic discourse is uttered in a dramatic situation , i.e the speaker is presented at some highly significant , critical , or dramatic moment (Francis , 1953:212).

Though the dramatic monologue requires a dramatic character to address the listener directly , there should be “ an advanced degree of impersonation . ” but , on the whole , the audience as well as the speaker become a part of the total area of imagination (Ibid.) .

Modern critical theory states that Robert Browning is the pathfinder of the dramatic monologue; yet , the origins of the term is traced back to the classical literature . Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics (Preminger 1974:529) gives a brief chronological data , showing that the term was found in ; (1) Greek classics (Ovid) , (2) Christian devotional literature (the Virgin addresses the Cross) , (3) Anglo-Saxon Poetry (The Wanderer , The Seafarer) , (4) the Middle Ages (Dunbar , Lyndsay) , (5) early & late Renaissance (Skepton , Raleigh , Drayton) and (6) Metaphysical Poetry (Donne’s Canonization & The Flea). The Encyclopedia ; however , doesn’t have any clue , in this respect , to Mesopotamian Literature where we could find the earliest specimen of the dramatic monologue in " Gilgamesh " .

Impersonation is the salient feature of the dramatic monologue . In romantic poetry ; however , there are certain instances where the dramatic voice is identified with the poet’s . This is clearly shown in Wordsworth’s " Composed a few Miles above Tintern Abbey " ,

How oft , in spirit , have I turned to thee .

O Sylvan Wye I thou wanderer thro’ the wood ,

How often has my spirit turned to thee ! (Brett & Jones , 1963 , 113 – 118)

T.S. Eliot (1957 : 89 – 102) skillfully distinguishes the three voices of poetry. He says :

The first voice is the voice of the poet talking to himself – or to nobody . The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience , whether large or small . The third is the voice of the poet he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse , when he is saying, not what he would say in his own person , but only what he can say within the limit of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character .

Then Eliot shows the variations on these voices . He

concedes :

The distinction between the first and the second , between the poet speaking to himself and the poet speaking to other

people , points to the problem of poetic communication ; the distinction between the poet addressing other people in either his own voice , and the poet inventing speech in which imaginary characters address each other , points to the problem of the difference between dramatic , quasi-dramatic and non-dramatic verse (Ibid).

So the interfusion of the first and the third voices or the absence of impersonation vitiates the achievement of monologue in the more usual sense of the word (Preminger ,1974 : 529) .

In modern poetry , however , the dramatic monologue is widely manipulated since it is the dramatic means by and through which modern poets can express their own visions, as we'll see in Tennyson's dramatic monologues .

Tithonus & Ulysses : Stylistic Analysis

To analyse Tennyson's dramatic monologues as poetic texts , Tithonus (1833-1850) and Ulysses (1842) are selected as linguistic data . The chosen poems have some characteristics in common . The themes of the dramatic monologues are derived from the classical universe . Tithonus , according to the legend , was a Trojan youth so beautiful that Aurora , the dawn , fell in love with him . He asked her , a goddess, to grant him immortality ,but omitted to request eternal youth , and Tennyson's monologue is delivered by a Tithonus withered and aged but unable to die . In Ulysses , Tennyson deals with a classic , heroic figure in a classic situation , but Ulysses , here , is not the hero of Homer's Odyssey . Rather, Tennyson's text is based upon a passage in Canto (26) of Dante's Inferno . Ulysses , there , addresses his mariners , “ Consider ye your origin ; yet were not made to live as beasts , but for pursuit of virtue and knowledge (Bukley and Woods , 1965 : 42) . These ideals are akin to Tennyson's . The poet has the classic hero speak as if he were a Victorian Englishman .

The other characteristic that Tithonus & Ulysses have in common is the poetic style. Tithonus and Ulysses are written in blank verse . What is

characteristic of the " unrhymed iambic pentameter " is that it is suitable for the serious treatment of serious themes . The opening lines of Tennyson's Tithonus manifest the critical situation of the hero,

The woods decay , the woods decay and fall ,
Tha vapors weep their burthen to the ground ,
Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath ,
And after many a summer dies the swan
(Ibid. : 44-45) .

Metrically , The iambic pentameter consists of a line of (5) feet , as shown in the first line of the verse ,

u - u - u - u - u -
The woods/ decay/ the woods/ decay/ and fall .

The iambic is the classical English measure , used for drama , epic didactic , descriptive and narrative verse by all the great English poets (Blackstone , 1965:43-4) . Likewise , we notify the unrhymed iambic pentameter used in Ulysses to show the psychological trait of the dramatic character .The hero who resides " by this still hearth among these barren crags/ Matched with an aged wife ," is apt to start a new adventure " to follow knowledge like a sinking star " ,

It little profits that an idle king ,
By this still hearth , among these barren crags ,
Matched with an aged wife , I mete and dole
Unequal laws unto a savage race ,
That heard , and sleep , and feed , and know
not me (Ibid. : 42-43) .

On lexico grammatical level , the cognitive content of Tennyson's Tithonus and Ulysses is expressed through the grammar of clause . The material process clauses are the dominant feature of the poem , as shown in the selected verbs " decay "(1) ,"fall"(1) " weep"(2), "come) (3) , "till",etc . In Ulysses , the salient feature is also the material process clauses represented by the chosen verbs , " mete"(3) . " hoard " (5) , " sleep" (5) , " feed " (5) , etc. The clauses in both monologues consist of two patterns: the transitive and the intransitive . The transitive pattern involves the actor (= the dramatic character) , the process (= the trans. / intrans. verb) and the goal (= the addressee) . These syntactic selections charge the whole setting with movement, but it is the sluggish movement that indicates monotony and oldness . The atmosphere of oldness and

, by many anxious watchers , be seen to emerge (Bukley and Wood , 1065 : 948-958) .

For Tennyson , he was profoundly religious , and he recognized the necessity , both for himself and for his generation , of reconciling if possible the new knowledge with the old faith (35)” . Tennyson believes that man’s mortality is a blessing . So by and through Tithonus , a poetic creation , he raises the autological question ,

Why should a man desires in any way
 To vary from the kindly race of men
 Or pass beyond the goal of Ordenance
 Where all should pause , as is most meet for
 All ? (Ibid.: 44-45)

The doctrine to live by ordenance or law is intensified In Aenon , a dramatic monologue , which mirrors Tennyson’s world-view ,

... to live by law ,
 Acting the law we live by without fear (Ibid. : 20) .

Moreover , Tennyson kept in close touch with the new science and the doctrine of evolution . Such mental transformationas are manifested by the monologues . The poet speaks through his dramatic hero :

We are –
 One equal temper of heroic hearts ,
 Made weak by time and fate , but strong in
 Will
 To strive , to seek , to find , and not to yield (Ibid.) .

So Tithonus , Ulysses and , in a way , Aenon are the poetic texts in which Tennyson’s system of views , concepts and notions are encoded . That is to say , the abstractions are claded in gowns of beauty by his poetic artistry .

Concluding Remarks

The literary work , imaginatively , represents the poet’s experience in the world he lives by . The study has shown that Tennyson’s dramatic monologues , namely , Tithonus , Ulysses and Aenon function as carriers to the poet’s world-view . The network of the linguistic levels , generated throughout the poetic texts , of linguistic levels help the poet build up the imaginative picture of the

world . Such a picture cannot be implemented without the fittingness of style to the lofty subject – matter he is concerned with . In this sense , Tennyson’s poetic intuition plays a significant role in manifesting his own vision .

Notes

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6. Buckley , Jerome Hamilton & Geroge Benjamin Woods (eds.) (1965) . Poetry of the Victorian Period Illinois : Scott,Foresman .
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