



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

Assertion of Faith and Optimism in Alfred Tennyson's 'Ulysses'

Eliza Zakaria

Ipp Scholar, Department of English, Assam University, India

Abstract:

The unrest in the religious and political faith during the Victorian era had a pessimistic influence on the poet Laureate, Alfred Tennyson. Due to the scientific discoveries, the existing religious faiths were questioned, which resulted in Tennyson's failure to endure the death of his friend Sir Hallam. The tone of inertia and stasis loom large over 'Tears Idle Tears', 'Break Break Break', and most dominantly over 'The Lotus Eaters'. This paper is an endeavor to shed on Tennyson's 'Ulysses', which deviates from the static melancholic tone of his earlier poems and celebrates the spirit of faith and optimism.

Keywords: Doubt, faith, optimism, science, Victorian

1. Introduction

'Ulysses' was first published in 1842 in the volume of 'Poems'. Victorian age was the period of paradox, a great deal of the Victorian intellectual effort was spent in trying to hold together a universe which was exploding. It was an age of conflicting explanations and theories, of scientific and economic confidence and of social and economic pessimism. The Industrial Revolution and scientific discoveries resulted in creating tension in Victorian England. With the Industrial Revolution, the slums with a poor living condition originated in England. And in 1859, with Darwin's 'On Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection', the very doctrine and historical base of Christianity were shaken to its roots. Religion and the 'Bible' were questioned and doubted. And this resultant philosophy and ideology is reflected in the early troubled poems of Tennyson. The impact of Darwinism is evident on Tennyson as he expresses in 'In Memoriam', about 'a God', "who is careful of the type, but careless of the single life," and about "Nature, red in tooth and claw," or stretching "Lame hands of faith." (Daiches; pg-1001)

With the publication of Darwin's evolutionary theories, the very existence of the Omnipotent God was questioned. Further, the poor living condition of the Victorian slums was the result of the Industrial Revolution, raised questions on the benevolent image of God. The Bible under such conditions failed to soothe the people with the concept of 'life after death.' Tennyson, a Victorian, was also a victim of this shattered faith. And his failure to come to terms with the assistance of religion, after the death of his friend Sir Hallam is reflected in his 'Break Break Break', and 'Tears Idle Tears'. However, Tennyson's 'Ulysses' is a deviation as it reflects the assertion of faith.

The dramatic monologue 'Ulysses', opens with a very lifeless and inactive description of 'Ulysses' household as "still hearth" and "barren crags". But soon the speaker expresses his desire not to limit himself to the island, but to satisfy his "hungry heart" by setting out for a voyage with his fellow mariners. This voyage in the metaphorical level is the optimism in Tennyson to free himself from the shackles of shattered faith in religion and give a momentum to live a life of action. Unlike 'The Lotus Eater', where Tennyson describes all the mariners in a trance and inactive mood, in 'Ulysses', Tennyson describes:

"For ever and forever when I move
How dull it is to pause, to make an end."(lines 21-22)

These lines echo a desire not to stop, rather to live life in action.

The crisis of faith in Tennyson and his failure to come to terms with the loss of his friend made him withdraw himself from the regular life. However, 'Ulysses' reflects the faith in Tennyson. In 'Ulysses', Tennyson could accept that knowledge is boundless and:

". . . life piled on life
Were all too little," (line 24)

to acquire knowledge. The crave for knowledge in Ulysses, which is described as:

"To follow knowledge like a sinking star" (line 31),

reflects Tennyson's capability to come to terms with the new discoveries and scientific developments.

Ulysses' decision to hand over the "Sceptor and the isle" to his son Telemachus, is again metaphoric. The "Sceptor and isle" can be described as the Victorian England, and Telemachus stands for the generation which succeeded to come to terms with the 'Victorianism'. And unlike Ulysses, who reflects the Renaissance spirit of discovering new lands and acquiring knowledge, Telemachus shall be more successful as a ruler to rule with the knowledge of the present. The declaration of Ulysses:

"This is my son, mine own Telemachus,
To whom I live the sceptor and the isle-----" (lines 31-32)

Is the reflection of his acceptance of the new changing time—the Victorian time, where Ulysses fail to adjust or fit himself clinging to his old faiths and beliefs.

The Brownian optimism and the faith in the afterlife echoes in Tennyson's 'Ulysses'. In Robert Browning's 'Last Ride Together', the speaker expresses his faith that he shall reunite with his beloved once again forever in heaven and their union shall be immortalized. There is a similar optimism in Tennyson's 'Ulysses'. In 'Ulysses', the speaker asks his fellow mariners to join him on the last voyage. He says:

"It may be we shall touch the Happy Isle,
And see the great Achilles, whom we know" (lines 61-62)

In the literary level, these lines suggest, the possibility that Ulysses feels of meeting Achilles, who is often identified as the hero of the Trojan War, and who is no more with them. But at a metaphorical level, the possibility the speaker nurtures in his heart, of meeting "the great Achilles, whom we know", is the restoration of faith in religion and the afterlife, to meet or once again to reunite with the loved ones who left for their heavenly abode.

The optimism of Tennyson rings loud in the closing lines of 'Ulysses', when the speaker declares:

"Made weak by time, and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield" (lines 69-70)

Tennyson's acceptance of the tumult of the time that weakens the people by replacing the age old religious faith with scientific discoveries is evident. But at the same time, Tennyson's optimism reflects in his assertion that instead of surrendering before time, and sitting idle, one must strengthen one's will power to fight, struggle and find the goal, as he says:

"Death closes all; but something ere the end
Some work of noble note, may yet be done." (lines 51-52).

2. Conclusion

Thus, Tennyson's 'Ulysses', is the reflection of faith and optimism in him. In 'Ulysses', Tennyson is seen to accept the changes. Tennyson's zeal for action is reflected in this poem with the restoration of shattered faith. And this is evident, as, talking of 'Ulysses', Tennyson himself writes to his son:

"It gave my feelings about the need of going forward and braving the struggle of life perhaps more simply than anything *in In Memoriam*" (Alfred Tennyson by Elaine Jordan.)

thereby expressing his buoyant optimism and abundant zest for life.

3. References

1. Chaudhury, Bibhash (ed), August Assembly :A Book of Poems. Guwahati : Papyrus , 2010. Print
2. Chaudhury , Mozbul . Studies in Victorian Literature. Guwahati : Aditya Book Distributor, 2012. Print.
3. Sanders, Andrew. The Short Oxford History of English Literature. New York : Oxford University Press, 1994. Print.