

TITHONUS

by Alfred Lord Tennyson

ALFRED LORD TENNYSON (1809-1892)

- Born at Somersby, Lincolnshire, the third surviving son of the rector, George Tennyson.
- Victorian era British writer, novelist, poet.
- Poet Laureate of UK during much of Queen Victoria's reign.
- Poet Laureate (1850-1892)-the longest, holding the Laureateship for 42 years.
- Was a poet of law and order as well as of progress.
- He believed in the divine scheme of things.
- Made strong friendships, notably with Arthur Hallam.
- Published two collections of poems in the early 1830s, which included 'The Lady of Shalott', 'Mariana in the South', and 'The Lotos-Eaters'.
- Over the next 17 years he continually worked on and revised a poetic tribute to his friend, which he published as 'In Memorium' in 1850. The poem became one of the best known and best loved of the period, with Queen Victoria saying that next to the Bible, it was her greatest comfort following the death of Prince Albert.
- His work 'Maud: A Monodrama' is a series of episodes presented through soliloquies.



- Morte d' Arthur
- Ulysses
- St. Simeon Stylites
- Crossing the Bar
- The Princess
- The Charge of The Light Brigade

- The Ancient Sage, Vastness, Akbar's Dream

- Historical plays: 'Queen Mary', 'Harold', 'Becket'

The Myth of Tithonus

- In Greek mythology, Tithonus was a Trojan by birth, the son of King Laomedon of Troy by a water nymph named Strymo ("harsh"). Eos, the Greek goddess of the dawn, abducted Ganymede and Tithonus from the royal house of Troy to be her consorts. When Zeus, the god of the sky, lightning and the thunder, stole Ganymede from her to be his cup-bearer, as a repayment, Eos asked for Tithonus to be made immortal, but forgot to ask for eternal youth. Tithonus indeed lived forever but grew ever older. In later tellings, Eos eventually turned him into a cricket to relieve him of such an existence. In the poem however, it is Eos, and not Zeus, who grants Tithonus immortality.

OVERVIEW OF THE POEM

- In the poem, Tithonus asks Eos for the gift of immortality, which she readily grants him, but forgets to ask for eternal youth along with it. As time wears on, age catches up with him. Wasted and withered, Tithonus is reduced to a mere shadow of himself. But since he is immortal, he cannot die and is destined to live forever, growing older and older with each passing day. The main classical source that Tennyson draws upon is from the story of Aphrodite's relationship with Anchises in the ancient Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite. In this Aphrodite briefly tells of Eos's foolishness in neglecting to ask Zeus for immortal youth for Tithonus along with his immortality.
- The original version of the poem, named "Tithon", was written in 1833 shortly after Tennyson's friend Arthur Henry Hallam's death but was not published. When William Makepeace Thackeray asked him for a submission to the Cornhill Magazine to be issued in January 1860 which he was editing, Tennyson made some substantial revisions to the text of the poem and submitted it under the title "Tithonus". It was published in the February edition. It was finally published by Tennyson in an anthology in the Enoch Arden volume in 1864.
- This poem was one of a set of four works (also including "Morte d'Arthur," "Ulysses," and "Tiresias") that Tennyson wrote shortly after Arthur Henry Hallam's death in 1833.

- This poem is a dramatic monologue: the entire text is spoken by a single character whose words reveal his identity. The lines take the form of blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter). The poem as a whole falls into seven paragraph-like sections of varying length, each of which forms a thematic unit unto itself.
- Dramatic Monologue: Dramatic monologue is a type of poetry written in the form of a speech of an individual character.

Features: The single person, who is patently not the poet, utters the speech that makes up the whole of the poem, in a specific situation at a critical moment. This person addresses and interacts with one or more other people; but we know of the auditors' presence, and what they say and do, only from clues in the discourse of the single speaker.

TITHONUS

-By Alfred Lord Tennyson

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,
Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,
And after many a summer dies the swan.
Me only cruel immortality
Consumes: I wither slowly in thine arms,
Here at the quiet limit of the world,
A white-hair'd shadow roaming like a dream
The ever-silent spaces of the East,
Far-folded mists, and gleaming halls of morn.

Alas! for this gray shadow, once a man—
So glorious in his beauty and thy choice,
Who madest him thy chosen, that he seem'd
To his great heart none other than a God!
I ask'd thee, 'Give me immortality.'
Then didst thou grant mine asking with a smile,
Like wealthy men, who care not how they give.

But thy strong Hours indignant work'd their wills,
And beat me down and marr'd and wasted me,
And tho' they could not end me, left me maim'd
To dwell in presence of immortal youth,
Immortal age beside immortal youth,
And all I was, in ashes. Can thy love,
Thy beauty, make amends, tho' even now,
Close over us, the silver star, thy guide,
Shines in those tremulous eyes that fill with tears
To hear me? Let me go: take back thy gift:
Why should a man desire in any way
To vary from the kindly race of men
Or pass beyond the goal of ordinance
Where all should pause, as is most meet for all?

A soft air fans the cloud apart; there comes
A glimpse of that dark world where I was born.
Once more the old mysterious glimmer steals
From thy pure brows, and from thy shoulders pure,
And bosom beating with a heart renew'd.
Thy cheek begins to redden thro' the gloom,
Thy sweet eyes brighten slowly close to mine,

Ere yet they blind the stars, and the wild team
Which love thee, yearning for thy yoke, arise,
And shake the darkness from their loosen'd manes,
And beat the twilight into flakes of fire.

Lo! ever thus thou growest beautiful
In silence, then before thine answer given
Departest, and thy tears are on my cheek.

Why wilt thou ever scare me with thy tears,
And make me tremble lest a saying learnt,
In days far-off, on that dark earth, be true?
'The Gods themselves cannot recall their gifts.'

Ay me! ay me! with what another heart
In days far-off, and with what other eyes
I used to watch—if I be he that watch'd—
The lucid outline forming round thee; saw
The dim curls kindle into sunny rings;
Changed with thy mystic change, and felt my blood
Glow with the glow that slowly crimson'd all
Thy presence and thy portals, while I lay,
Mouth, forehead, eyelids, growing dewy-warm

With kisses balmier than half-opening buds
Of April, and could hear the lips that kiss'd
Whispering I knew not what of wild and sweet,
Like that strange song I heard Apollo sing,
While Ilion like a mist rose into towers.

Yet hold me not for ever in thine East:
How can my nature longer mix with thine?
Coldly thy rosy shadows bathe me, cold
Are all thy lights, and cold my wrinkled feet
Upon thy glimmering thresholds, when the steam
Floats up from those dim fields about the homes
Of happy men that have the power to die,
And grassy barrows of the happier dead.
Release me, and restore me to the ground;
Thou seest all things, thou wilt see my grave:
Thou wilt renew thy beauty morn by morn;
I earth in earth forget these empty courts,
And thee returning on thy silver wheels.

SUMMARY

- The poem begins with the speaker, Tithonus, desiring how sorrowful the naturally aging woods make him. Unlike all the other elements of the world, he is unable to die.
- The woods in the forests grow old and their leaves fall to the ground.
- ‘vapours’ are clouds weeping rain.
- Man is born, works the earth, and then dies and is buried underground. Yet the speaker, Tithonus, is cursed to live forever.
- Everything in nature tends towards death and dissolution.
- He cannot, as they do, return to the earth and become something new.
- Tithonus tells Aurora, goddess of the dawn, that he grows old slowly in her arms like a “white-hair’d shadow” roaming in the east. (‘shadow’ and ‘dream’ both imply an existence that is divorced from real life.)
- He is stuck in the “East” with his once beloved Eos who is the cause of his wretched state.
- Tithonus’ world is completely silent, and somehow beyond human comforts and desires.

- Tithonus laments that while he is now a “gray shadow” he was once a beautiful man chosen as Aurora’s lover.
- He remembers that he long ago asked Aurora to grant him eternal life: “Give me immortality!” Aurora granted his wish generously, like a rich philanthropist who has so much money that he gives charity without thinking twice.
- However, the ‘Hours’, the goddesses who accompany Aurora, were angry that Tithonus was able to resist death, so they took their revenge by battering him until he grew old and withered.
- He is slowly being consumed by the hours of his life that will never end.
- Now, though he cannot die, he remains forever old; and he must dwell in the presence of Aurora, who renews herself each morning and is thus forever young. Meanwhile she is eternally young, so their existence is “immortal age beside immortal youth.”
- Tithonus appeals to Aurora to take back the gift of immortality while the “silver star” of Venus rises in the morning.
- He now realizes the ruin in desiring to be different from all the rest of mankind and in living beyond the “goal of ordinance,” the normal human lifespan.



STANZA 3

- Just before the sun rises, Tithonus catches sight of the “dark world” where he was born a mortal.
- ‘A glimpse of that dark world where I was born.’ – On one level, this is simply literal, as the world is in darkness before the sun rises, but there is also a sense that Tithonus was living in a dark shadow world before love brought him out into the light.
- He witnesses the coming of Aurora, the dawn: Aurora’s gradual illumination begins; her cheek begins to turn red and her eyes grow so bright that they overpower the light of the stars.
- ‘And bosom beating with a heart renew’d.’ – The heart-beat sound of ‘bosom beating’ suggests an access of life, but also sexual passion.
- ‘Thy sweet eyes brighten slowly close to mine,’ – Much of the imagery here suggests Aurora growing more passionate and loving – something that Tithonus can no longer respond to.
- Aurora’s team of horses awakes and converts the twilight into fire.
- ‘...the wild team/Which love thee, yearning for thy yoke, arise,’ – Tennyson conflates Aurora with Apollo, the sun god, here, so that it is she who drives the sun chariot across the skies.
- ‘And shake the darkness from their loosen’d manes,/And beat the twilight into flakes of fire.’ – Horses stamping their shoes on rock can make sparks; these horses of the dawn actually seem to create light.

- ‘Lo! ever thus thou growest beautiful/In silence,’ – Tithonus’ isolation is such that Aurora never seems to speak to him, and he never hears another voice.
- The poet now addresses Aurora, telling her that she always grows beautiful and then leaves before she can answer his request.
- ...then before thine answer given/Departest,’ – to the request ‘take back thy gift’ and let him die.
- He questions why she must “scare” him with her tearful look of silent regret; her look makes him fear that an old saying might be true—that “The Gods themselves cannot recall their gifts.”
- ‘...and thy tears are on my cheek.’ – Aurora’s tears may answer Tithonus’ request and confirm that the ‘gods cannot take back a gift once given’ – a common mythological idea found.
- Possibly, however, she still loves Tithonus too much to let him go. Her ‘tears’ are also the dew of early morning.
- ‘In days far-off, on that dark earth,’ – a further reference to the ‘darkness’ of Tithonus’ past.
- Tithonus sighs and remembers his youth long ago, when he would watch the arrival of the dawn and feel his whole body come alive as he lay down and enjoyed the kisses of another.
- He remembers, as if from another life or as another man, when he used to love the experience of the dawn: the outline forming around her, the “sunny rings” of hair, his own blood glowing as the day would warm, the feeling of the dawn kissing him.
- ‘The lucid outline forming round thee;’ – ‘lucid’ simply means clear, but Tennyson is thinking of its original connection with ‘lux’ – light.
- ‘Changed with thy mystic change,’ – the point here is that Tithonus, in his youth, still had the power to respond to Aurora’s luminous passion. Here, her change is seen as ‘mystic,’ in that it affects him, and indeed the whole world.

- ‘...and felt my blood/Glow with the glow that slowly crimson'd all’ – He remembers when he could respond to her sensual awakening and share in it. The language here has an obvious dimension of physical passion.
 - ‘Mouth, forehead, eyelids, growing dewy-warm/With kisses balmier than half-opening buds/Of April,...’ – a balm is a soothing ointment.
 - ‘...and could hear the lips that kiss'd/Whispering I knew not what of wild and sweet,’ – Now, there is only silence for Tithonus.
 - ‘Like that strange song I heard Apollo sing,/While Ilion like a mist rose into towers.’ – Alluding to the story of the magical raising of the walls of Troy, and probably suggestive of physical arousal.
 - This lover from his youth used to whisper to him “wild and sweet” melodies, like the music of Apollo’s lyre, which accompanied the construction of Ilion (Troy).
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- ‘Yet hold me not for ever in thine East;’ – A beautiful line: to desire the West is to desire the dissolution and death associated with the sunset.
 - Tithonus asks Aurora not to keep him imprisoned in the east where she rises anew each morning, because his eternal old age contrasts so painfully with her eternal renewal.
 - ‘Coldly thy rosy shadows bathe me, cold/Are all thy lights, and cold my wrinkled feet’ – a superb image, contrasting with the warmth of the preceding lines. The reader’s imaginative gaze is diverted from the ‘Mouth, forehead, eyelids...’ of the young Tithonus down to the ‘wrinkled feet’ of the old man, cold upon the marble floors of Aurora’s palace.
 - He cringes cold and wrinkled, whereas she rises each morning to warm “happy men that have the power to die” and men who are already dead in their burial mounds (“grassy barrows”).
 - Tithonus asks Aurora to release him and let him die.
 - This way, she can see his grave when she rises and he, buried in the earth, will be able to forget the emptiness of his present state, and her return “on silver wheels” that stings him each morning.

SUMMARY

- Deterioration and death are two prominent ideas in the opening line of the poem. The speaker tells us that the woods decay and summer dies. Both these words contribute to an idea of ageing and, eventually, passing away. Decay suggests that, over time, things become less vibrant and this is an idea that is central to Tennyson's *Tithonus* in which the main character himself fades over time. The metaphor used to describe the swan as a ghost links with this idea of life ebbing away. A poet might choose to describe a swan as a beautiful creature that represents purity but, in this case, the imagery is dark and pessimistic. The swan becomes a shade, haunting the pond, and helps to establish the sense of melancholy that permeates the poem. The speaker, Tithonus, is cursed to live forever. Tithonus tells Aurora, goddess of the dawn, that he grows old slowly in her arms like a "white-hair'd shadow" roaming in the east.
- Tithonus laments that while he is now a "gray shadow" he was once a beautiful man chosen as Aurora's lover. He remembers that he long ago asked Aurora to grant him eternal life: "Give me immortality!" Aurora granted his wish generously, like a rich philanthropist who has so much money that he gives charity without thinking twice. However, the Hours, the goddesses who accompany Aurora, were angry that Tithonus was able to resist death, so they took their revenge by battering him until he grew old and withered.

- Now, though he cannot die, he remains forever old; and he must dwell in the presence of Aurora, who renews herself each morning and is thus forever young. Tithonus appeals to Aurora to take back the gift of immortality while the “silver star” of Venus rises in the morning. He now realizes the ruin in desiring to be different from all the rest of mankind and in living beyond the “goal of ordinance,” the normal human lifespan.
- Just before the sun rises, Tithonus catches sight of the “dark world” where he was born a mortal. He witnesses the coming of Aurora, the dawn: her cheek begins to turn red and her eyes grow so bright that they overpower the light of the stars. Aurora’s team of horses awakes and converts the twilight into fire.
- The poet now addresses Aurora, telling her that she always grows beautiful and then leaves before she can answer his request. He questions why she must “scare” him with her tearful look of silent regret; her look makes him fear that an old saying might be true— that “The Gods themselves cannot recall their gifts.”

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THEMES

Death

- The great poets commonly take up the subject of death in their works, but it is rare to see a great poet treat death in such a sustained and deeply personal way as Tennyson does.
- Many of his greatest works were written in the aftermath of the death of his closest friend, Arthur Henry Hallam.
- “Ulysses” is about the great hero searching for life in spite of old age and coming death, and “Tithonus” concerns the weariness of life on earth when all one wants to do is fade into the earth and no longer linger on.

Nature

- Nature plays many roles in Tennyson’s poetry.
- Nature is also an ever-present reminder of the cycle of life from birth to death; existing outside of that cycle can bring grief and separation from one’s mortal humanity, for better or for worse.
- Occasionally Nature is a reminder of the vitality of life and existence; other times Nature is used as a metaphor for death

Grief

- Grief permeates Tennyson’s poetry and was a major feature of Tennyson’s emotional life.
- He endured the deaths of his parents, the ensuing mental illness and addictions of many of his family members and, as a kind of muse, the death of his close friend Arthur Henry Hallam.
- His poems are frank discussions of despair and the trouble of using words sufficient to express it, and he demonstrates the significance of writing poetry in the face of sorrow and loss..