

Tennyson's Poems Summary and Analysis of "Tithonus"

[Tithonus](#) speaks to his beloved, the goddess [Eos](#) (or Aurora). The woods are decaying, men work the land but then die and lie beneath it, and the swan dies after many years. Tithonus, however, lingers on in “cruel immortality.” He has become immortal, but he is old, withering in the arms of his beloved on the eastern edge of the world, and feeling like a wandering shadow. He was once a man, he says, feeling “glorious in his beauty” and in being chosen by this goddess. He asked for immortality, and she got it for him, yet he still aged and aged. Meanwhile she is eternally young, so their existence is “immortal age beside immortal youth.” Is her love enough to overcome this horror? Why should anyone want this kind of special treatment and avoid the normal death of mortals?

When a soft breeze parts the clouds, Tithonus can see the Earth below. He sees the glimmer in his beloved’s brow, her cheeks reddening, her eyes brightening, at the prospect of bringing dawn with her horses and chariot.

The constant renewal of the dawn brings her to tears when she looks at Tithonus in contrast. Tithonus is afraid that it will be true that “the Gods themselves cannot recall their gifts,” that his situation will continue forever.

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. She would whisper something otherworldly, like “that strange song I heard Apollo sing / While Ilion like a mist rose into towers.”

He asks her to release him and restore him to mortality and the grave because his nature can never truly mix with hers. He experiences the coolness of her “rosy shadows” while the men below are still warmed by the day. These men are happy and possess “the power to die,” and are even happier in death. By letting him go, she would still be able to see his grave eternally. By returning to the Earth he would forget “these empty courts,” while she would continue to bring the dawn on her silver wheels.

Analysis

Tennyson first wrote “Tithonus” in 1833 as a pendant (companion) poem to parallel “[Ulysses](#).” Tithonus achieves immortality, but not the kind that Ulysses desires. While Ulysses wants to stay alive in order to keep adventuring, ready to fight his next battle despite his old age, Tithonus is stuck in the eternal cycle of the dawn and becomes weaker and colder the longer he lives. While his beloved is happy to go through the same motions day after day, Tithonus (like Ulysses) understands that mortals are built for something else—to live and then to die. With no vision of new adventures ahead, (unlike Ulysses), Tithonus is ready to die. Like “Ulysses,” “Morte d’Arthur,” and “Tiresias,” “Tithonus” memorializes and expresses Tennyson’s feelings about the death of his close friend Arthur Henry Hallam. It is suggested that he comprised this poem after hearing his fiancée’s comment, “None of the Tennysons ever die.”

The poem was changed slightly and published in 1859 in *Cornhill Magazine*, edited by William Makepeace Thackeray.

The poem is a dramatic monologue spoken by Tithonus, primarily to his beloved, Eos, goddess of the dawn (Aurora in Roman myth). It is seven stanzas in blank verse, and its meter is iambic pentameter, perhaps reflecting the unnatural combination of mortal and immortal. There are no heroic (rhyming) couplets, unless one counts the two lines ending with the same word,

To dwell in presence of immortal youth, / Immortal age beside immortal youth,

which emphasizes the contrast between them.

The poem's tragic situation is based on the Greek myth of Tithonus of Troy and Eos. Tithonus was not entirely human, being the son of King Laomedon of Troy by a water nymph. In the myth, Eos kidnapped him and asked Zeus for Tithonus to receive eternal life, but she neglected to stipulate eternal youth. Thus, Tithonus grows older and withers away without ever dying. In later versions he becomes a cicada who begs to die. Tennyson's poem is also indebted to *The Fall of Hyperion* by John Keats, in which Moneta has a similar fate.

In Tennyson's poem, Tithonus is the one who requested immortality. He seems to have wanted it for no other purpose than to keep admiring Eos and being admired by her. Though he also was proud of his beauty, he did not think to ask for eternal youth. Thus began the unintended consequences of missing an essential technicality. He is utterly miserable that he cannot partake in the death that is the due of every mortal. People who know they will die will live a different kind of life, perhaps a happier one, and they are all the happier for achieving their natural end when they die (without reference to whatever may happen after that).

Thus "Tithonus," like "Ulysses," is a crisis lyric, though the crisis is different. Here death is to be desired, not feared, since it is part of the natural cycle of mortal species. Tithonus rejects the ever-freshness of the dawn cycle of a goddess in favor of absorption into the life-and-death cycle of mortal species. Understanding this point of view clarifies why, in the first stanza, Tithonus admires the swan who dies; he sees his kind of immortality, rather than death, as "cruel."

One critic, William Flesch, writes that "time is the name for the pressure of eternity, not ephemerality, for a future that will be endless and endlessly more bleak." This is Tithonus's experience with time, unlike that of Eos, who brightens up to bring the same dawn to the world over and over again. Her time cycle is truly circular, while his remains linear. He does not properly participate in her natural rhythm, nor does he participate in the kind of human aging that leads properly to death (whether or not one's existence then opens out into something else).

This problem is understood by Eos: he continually asks her for release from his imprisonment in his withering body, and she answers with tears but no help. Arthur D. Ward notes,

Tithonus' use of the word "ever" implies that this cycle has been enacted for ages. "Ever thus" she answers his prayer for release only with her tears. Ever frightened by her answer, he eludes it, flees to the past, and emerges to repeat his request and renew the cycle. Thus the structure of Tithonus' monologue is further evidence of his absolute passivity. As his environment, shaped

and measured by the daily departure of Eos and her dawn-chariot, is cyclical and repetitive, so is his consciousness.

Tithonus is trapped, but the reader is not. We are those happy mortals who can choose the life of Ulysses or, if we lack ambition, the quiet confines of daily routine. We can enjoy the feeling of the dawn each morning, at least for the days we have left.