

THE USE OF MYTH IN ALFRED TENNYSON'S "ULYSSES"

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*Abstract: The purpose of the present paper is to demonstrate that myth can be used as a vehicle, a means of conveying a message to the potential reader. The Greek myth of Ulysses or Odysseus is used by Tennyson as a verbal remedy, himself an easy prey to pessimism after the tragic death of his good friend Arthur Hallam. The author picked the Greek hero as source of inspiration due to his ineluctable sense of bravery and optimism when faced with the hardships of a cruel fate. The rewriting of Homer's story is done in the spirit of a contemporary inspirational talk. Needless to say that, to Tennyson, like for other many romantic poets, the worlds of Greece and Rome provided an unquenchable source of inspiration. Yet, the author, masterfully turns the ancient myth into a psychological tool, a sort of neuro-linguistic programming technique meant to boost your self-esteem and combat idleness and the feeling of spleen present in the romantic poets' DNA.*

*Keywords: myth, psychological technique, healing power of words, NPL according to Homer*

The purpose of the present paper is to demonstrate that myth can be used as a vehicle, a means of conveying a message to the potential reader. According to the famous French philosopher Roland Barthes, "a myth is, in its most basic form, a type of speech." (Barthes 9)

The Greek myth of Ulysses or Odysseus is used by Tennyson as a verbal remedy, himself an easy prey to pessimism after the tragic death of his good friend Arthur Hallam. The author picked the Greek hero as source of inspiration due to his ineluctable sense of bravery and optimism when faced with the hardships of a cruel fate. The rewriting of Homer's story is done in the spirit of a contemporary inspirational talk. Needless to say that, to Tennyson, like for other many romantic poets, the worlds of Greece and Rome provided an unquenchable source of inspiration. Yet, the author, masterfully turns the ancient myth into a psychological tool, a sort of neuro-linguistic programming technique meant to boost your self-esteem and combat idleness and the feeling of spleen present in the romantic poets' DNA.

The poem is a dramatic monologue with not only one listener but three: the reader, Odysseus himself, and his crew of mariners. Ulysses tells his three audiences about his journey to a land far away from home the final destination being Ithaca, where his wife Penelope, and son Telemachus, lovingly await for him. But the ancient myth is just the vehicle of an unambiguous intention, that of disclosing a personal truth. From this perspective, the dramatic monologue was the poetic form perfectly tailored to the needs of the speaker, namely to reveal his temperament and character. Judging from this viewpoint, we might assert that Tennyson makes use of myth as a tool, an instrument of pursuit, i.e. the pursuit of new knowledge and the achievement of inner balance. Ulysses is eager to live new adventures and reach thereby personal fulfillment. He is a classical hero who is supposedly brave and flawless in his capacity of a hero, yet the perfect image is willingly distorted by the poet who makes him an ailing human being. His major suffering comes from feeling unhappy with society in particular and life in general.

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The author makes use of dramatic monologue precisely with a view to investigating this adventurous side of Ulysses who purposefully seeks adventure not the peace and quiet of family life, as Homer's 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.

The dramatic monologue is a poetic form where an imaginary speaker or a historical character express personal thoughts and feelings by addressing an imaginary silent audience. Tennyson, the so-called saddest of all British romantic poets, uses dramatic monologue with a focus on the speaker's personal philosophy of life. The myth of Ulysses or Odysseus is used for the adventurous, seeking spirit of the hero but the novelty is that Tennyson made him a misfit, a rebel endowed with credibility on account of his heroic deeds.

Tennyson's personal philosophy of life is rendered through the voice of Ulysses who starts his monologue with a bitter thought on life

It little profits that an idle king,  
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,  
Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole  
Unequal laws unto a savage race,  
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.

The poet speaks through the mouth of his hero about his Christian faith which is the laying foundation for his ability to accept Victorian science as more viable and likely to provide the individual with life-preserving skills. (Hahn 2) Ulysses is not willing to come back to his home in Itacha but looks confidently towards the future.

Come, my friends,  
'T is not too late to seek a newer world.  
Push off, and sitting well in order smite  
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds  
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths  
Of all the western stars, until I die.

Thus, Ulysses' journey transcends the limitations of pure travel and the extension of the quest leads to the unveiling of a truth: life is very short but knowledge is infinite. Therefore, the pursuit of knowledge is the only path to happiness and bliss and he urges everyone "to follow knowledge like a sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought."

Another illustration of dramatic monologue and its use with a view to disclosing personal truths is the poem "My Last Duchess" by Robert Browning. "My Last Duchess" is a dramatic monologue not written from its author's point of view but the point of view of a fictional character. This perspective shifts the focus of interpretation enabling the reader to perceive more significance of the story being told than the actual facts themselves. Just as in the case of Alfred's Tennyson's Ulysses, the purpose we have pursued in writing this paper is to demonstrate that a speaker's utterances convey a lot of philosophical meaning, since language is intertwined with consciousness as shown by Mikhail Bakhtin. "Everything that the poet sees, understands and thinks, he does through the eyes of a given language, in its

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inner forms, and there is nothing that might require, for its expression, the help of any other or alien language.”. (Bakhtin 286)

From the point of view of psychoanalytical criticism, the dramatic monologue is a means of accommodating speech with a view to disclosing personal truths. The author makes use of dramatic monologue to explore the theme of power.

Browning’s speaker, the Duke, lives in the city of Ferrara in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. He has recently been widowed, and his next potential father-in-law sends an emissary to his house in order to find out details about his would-be son-in-law. The latter gives vent to his inner turmoil and gets emotional over a painting of his late wife.

Taking into account that the poem was written and published in the Victorian era may greatly enhance the reader’s understanding of the Duke’s obsession to fix the behavior of his wife since the lady had done injustice to him by her frivolous attitude towards men. The Victorian attitude to women seems to be a very important factor in grasping the gist of the poem. It is as if the writer uses the poem to give himself the opportunity to speak his mind. His personal mind.

The literal meaning of the poem is just a string of words; yet, there is hidden meaning underlying the story being told by the Duke. His monologue enables Browning to tackle upon delicate issues such as political power

“.....I gave commands;  
Then all smiles stopped together.” (Browning)

Here the reader remains wondering who he was giving commands to assuming thereby that he used to give orders to an inferior hence his position of power. Or conjugal power for that matter,

“Though his fair daughter’s self, as I avowed  
At starting, is my object.” (Browning)

As Glennis Byron clearly stated “language reveals the individual to be formed by the very society she critiques.” (Byron 19). The Duke passes judgments over his late wife’s behavior and character being overtly ironic of her childish approach to things of life. To a contemporary individual this might be considered as a virtue, something to be admired in a woman. Paradoxically, as clearly stated by the feminist critic Mary Wollstonecraft, the epithet childish is a term of weakness when applied to men or women. Her being so easily impressed by the simple things of life is presented by the Duke as flimsy, weak, not worthy of an amazing husband as himself:

“Too easily impressed; she liked whate’er  
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.  
Sir, ’twas all one! My favour at her breast,  
The dropping of the daylight in the West,  
The bough of cherries some officious fool  
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule  
She rode with round the terrace—all and each  
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,  
Or blush, at least.” (Browning)

Throughout his monologue, the Duke makes extensive use of the possessive adjective “my” which is an incontestable proof of his treating of women as objects in his personal collection. He is vain and arrogant, saying that :

“She thanked men—good! but thanked  
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked  
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name

With anybody's gift. "(Browning)

He undeniably considers that her becoming part of his family by marriage should have been praised accordingly which his life totally failed to do. While unveiling to the emissary the truth of his past relation he actually makes a statement of assertiveness and personal truth.

According to the rules of dramatic monologue, the reader is supposed to get only glimpses of the truth not the entire picture of it. And that is exactly what Browning is doing when allowing his Duke to speak freely of his politically incorrect late wife. In terms of language, irony is the proper rhetorical means to address such couch confession.

Nevertheless, the feeling that the reader gets from reading the Duke's monologue is that he is much too subjective of his presentation of facts, as if his words were not to be trusted completely but still reliable until proven otherwise. Browning's speaker speaks as if he were intellectually and socially superior, expressing himself eloquently, proving thereby complete control over his utterance. The words the Duke uses create a world, the monologue being a linguistic vehicle of conveying a message to the readers. Irony is meant to disambiguate the truth of the utterance and embed words with meta-poetic veracity. The static thing, the painting of his wife, is something the Duke can have total control of whereas the task of controlling a human being is somewhat hard to achieve. The world creates in his monologue is entirely self-made but, ironically, the Duke wants it peopled as well, as any human emotion needs witnesses.

To sum up, we may conclude that the dramatic monologue in "My Last Duchess" is just an attempt to control reality by transforming life into art. The Duke's monologue is but an opportunity Browning takes in order to express his moral ideas and reshape reality to his liking. The truth seems elusive, impossible to apprehend; and the only path which leads to it is by inference from a particular point of view. Browning's fictional character is a vehicle driving the reader to the destination of truth.

Both poems are perfect instances of how dramatic monologue can be used as a linguistic means of rhetorical power. Ulysses and the Duke are powerful characters endowed with dominant personalities who are keen on smoothing the path for their kin proving them with philosophical truths which they acquired through personal suffering and struggle. Fighting their own demons they were able to better understand that inner peace and equanimity is only acquired when managing to know your own self. It is only then that you get to know the universe and become part of it as a perfect embodiment of godly spirit in a mortal flesh.

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