

The Sketch of Mother Characters in Alfred Lord Tennyson's Poems

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Abstract: *A close study of Tennyson's poems reveals the fact that the lonely deserted young girls figure in his poetry written before 1850 when he himself had undergone all the sufferings of a lonely man for the love of Rosa Baring and Emily. After 1850, he became the spokesman of the Victorian moral values as the poet-Laureate and turned to present the portraits of a few old lonely mothers languishing for their lost children. Thus, a large body of Tennyson's poetry is replete with solitary female figures which may well be taken as the symbols of the poet's aesthetic self and the unconscious mind. They are all images produced by his creative genius rather than simple descriptions of female types. In his poems, we find that the portraits of good mothers, though they are only a few, are characterized by the 'passive virtues'- chastity, humility, and obedience-and their strengths are those of sympathy, gentleness and endurance. The mother figures appear like the summer calm of golden charity and having courage to endure and obey. Such are the noble mothers who stay at home and build up their children into noble life.*

Keywords: Desire, love, sex, motherhood, virtues, courage, endurance, obedience, death, remorse

I. INTRODUCTION

Tennyson was probably the most representative literary man of the Victorian period. His poetry is an epitome of his times which exhibited the life of England, the voice of a whole people expressing their doubts their faith, religion, political situation, grief and the condition of women. The men and women who seem most real in Tennyson's poetry are those whom he painted out of everyday life and in the sphere of the common affections and troubles of mankind. He has written more about women than any other Victorian poet.

Motherhood is considered one of the highest duties of a woman. They should find their only perfect life in marriage and in the home; their only exercise of sacrifice in motherhood, in nursing the sick, in tending the poor, or their only career in personal devotion to those they love. In the poem *The Princess*, the Prince very affectionately appreciates his mother's noble character who: Looks as whole as some serene creation 'minted in the golden moods'. It is evident that women are gentle, noble and good. They are usually trapped within their maternal function, a biological imperative which unless dissatisfied make them tender, good and stupid. To be a true wife, such as Tennyson has drawn on the lips of the Prince or to be a 'sweet and noble mother', one-'Not learned, save in gracious household ways, not perfect, nay, but full of tender wants/No angel, but a dearer being, all dipt/In angel instincts, breathing Paradise'.

Tennyson suggests that women's role is to be a good housewife and enjoy the blessed good life of the home. He writes in *The Princess*, 'Man for the field and women for the hearth/Man for the sword and for the needle she/Man to command and woman to obey/All else confusion'. Motherhood is considered one of the highest duties of a woman. Their only exercise of sacrifice in motherhood, in nursing the sick, in tending the poor, or their only career in personal devotion to those they love. Thus, mother becomes the image of a noble creature at home and builds up her children into noble life. This indeed is the work of woman-hood done not only at home but for the State and humanity at large. Unfortunately in our complex and crowded society, there are thousands of women who have no home, who are not wives and mothers but who are hungry to become themselves, to realize themselves in work, to live outside of themselves in the life and movement of the whole.

Tennyson imagines the mother characters in two contrasting ways which conform to notions of good and bad but which are each concerned with negation of the mother, either through her 'infantilization or through her conquest and transformation in to the ideal Feminine'.¹ In *Demeter and Persephone*, we find Tennyson's concept of good mothers as 'yielding breast'. In her anguish of motherhood, Demeter imagines the loss of Persephone to Aidoneus, the God of Death. In the absence of her daughter, her motherly love expands. She imagines every object of nature mourning and wailing and finds herself a 'desolate' mother.

Demeter is considered by Tennyson, one of the most beautiful types of womanhood. Her maternal compassion and regeneration endorses her with a vision of a new religion of love. She prays to Gods, 'Not spread the plague, the famine'. The poem smells of the fruitful rain washed earth; the earth breathes and is pregnant and gives birth in it; all her motherhood loves all her children from line of it. Motherhood first of the Earth and then of Humanity, is the innermost being of the poem - the 'deathless heart of motherhood'. The personal motherhood of Demeter, the motherhood of one heart for one child, arouses our sense of sympathy and leads to the realms of imagination. She possesses an infinite tenderness of heart and tries to console all the wailing mothers on the earth. She gives to ailing children the same breast which had nurtured her daughter Persephone. Finally, when she is united with her daughter, she still fears if she may not be snatched away from her bosom and says that she feels the deathless heart of motherhood.

In the same way in *The Princess*, Psyche's union with her child is the best pictorial description of Tennyson's notion of motherhood where: 'The sacred mother's bosom, panting, burst'. This is the best kind of picture that Tennyson has tried to paint in which the subject matter-motherhood, 'the sacred bosom' of a bare-breasted Madonna'- 'license a timid and slightly fatigued pornographic treatment'. The above lines provide a maternal lesson which even Ida cannot ignore as Cyril says that love and Nature, these are two more terrible and stronger in their instinctive demands than the intellectual and moral claims of Ida's case. The feelings which enact Psyche's final banishment are applicable to all women of the world and their demotion to the domestic sphere. It also relates to the silenced and passive side of that division between public and private life which their maternal function creates.

Ida is not, in fact, a mother but in her proud isolation and independence, she represents 'unaccommodated' woman, the 'phallic mother' who is both exciting and terrifying whose dark secret place must be invaded and violated. The Prince and his friends do this by disguising themselves as girls wearing frocks and their journey is through: '... the lean and wrinkled precipices / By every coppice-feathered chasm and cleft /, Drop through ambrosial gloom'.

According to Tennyson, the child is the link through the parts. This conviction is referred to Anglia, Psyche's baby, who softens Ida's heart, and to woman's responsibility to 'stay-all the fair young planet in her hands'. In this sense, a child grows into a young man and then to an adult and what is more important is his relation with the 'mothers' in the poem. For this is a much 'be - mothered poem' - Psyche, Blanche, the dead mothers of the Prince and Ida-and the Prince knows that "Ida's threat to transform the category, far beyond even Blanche's embittered version, if successful, will turn all the company of women into dragons rather than Andromeda's or Demeters".² Ida, perhaps, comes nearest of all Tennyson's dangerous women to the 'femme fatale' of monstrous properties that that poets of the Romantic age celebrated. She feels that Nature is against her but does not realize it. She fears her own womanhood.

In *The Grandmother*, we find a lonely old mother. At the death of her eldest son Willy, she narrates her story of woeful life to her little grand-daughter Anne. She has 'witnessed many deaths in her life/ none of them left alive'. For Harry went at sixty, father at sixty-five: And Willy, my eldest-born/ at nigh threescore and ten/ I know them all as babies/ But now, after so many deaths in her family, there are no tears left in her eyes to shed. However, she still remembers each moment of her suffering after she has got married. Her husband was not kind to her and her first child was born dead. She was able to bear the sufferings of her life 'a world of woe'.

In *Rizpha*, we find all the tragedy of Rizpah's motherhood which has loved and lost. It brings together the passion of bereaved motherhood and the thin wailing of her boy's voice on the wind, the raging of the storms and Willy's voice in the wind, 'O Mother, come out to me'. There is the tragedy of Nature wedded to the tragedy of a mother. Her son Willy is hanged in chains and his body is eaten by ravens. The horror and the shame, like ravens, eat her heart. In the poem, we find two important things; its dreadful pathos and its infinite motherhood. The misery of love to her only son drove her to madness. The gathering of the bones of her son shows the essence of her deep motherly love and she desperately

asks: 'Flesh of my flesh was gone/ but bone of my bone was left'. Now tired of life-like the old 'Grand-mother'-she longs for death and the Lord who has been with her in the dark/ will make her happy with her son in the Heaven. Thus, in the poem, we find the depths of sorrow, the depths of love, infinite pity, and infinite motherhood.

In *Maud*, Tennyson has fully exposed the stubborn indecision regarding women who are as 'double natured', as pure essence and as 'polluted life giver'. Its basic themes are of birth and death, of male rivalry and female suffering, of blood and lust. Maud's brother, who carries the sign of his mother in the ring of hair he wears at the moment of his death-like all men, in fact-the speaker of 'Maud', carries the legacy of his mother's sexual fall.

II. CONCLUSION

Tennyson's mother characters are drawn each apart like solitary statues with imaginary names written underneath them. Every woman is endowed with the general essence of Woman, and therefore of the Mother. She is all that man desires and all that he does not attain. She is the good mediatory between favorable Nature and man; and she is the temptation of un-conquered Nature, counter to all goodness. Psyche's passion of motherhood; Rizpah's intense penetration for collecting the bones of her dead son; the Grandmother's wailing for her dead children, Demeter's maternal compassion are the best examples of Tennyson's creative genius. Tennyson has always tried to envisage women with due honour and he succeeded in giving many of them the credence, the merit and the nobleness of character.

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