



## **The Concept of Aesthetics in Tennyson's Poetry**

M. K. Harmoush

Faculty of Arts & Humanities, Foreign Languages & Literature, King Abdul Aziz University,  
Jeddah, Saudi Arabia  
Email: dr-harmoush@hotmail.com

DOI:

Abstract

Aestheticism is a literary movement appeared in the 18<sup>th</sup> century appreciating beauty as the highest quality in man or nature. Lord Alfred Tennyson (1800-1892) felt the impact of the movement that consequently echoed in his poetry. This paper aims to explore Tennyson's notion of aestheticism, found in his poetry, through true analysis of many of his famous poems. Tennyson aesthetics is clear in his poetic forms as well as in his poetic contents. His aestheticism is typically based on the general credo 'Art for Art's sake', but away from its moral concepts and social matters.

Keywords: Tennyson's poetry, aestheticism, form and content, art for art's sake, Victorian poetry, Lotos Eaters

### **Introduction**

Aesthetics in definition is the highly appreciation of beauty in man or in nature. Aesthetics is a literary and philosophical movement appeared in the Western culture in 18<sup>th</sup> century and perhaps before. The term first used by the German, Alexander Baumgartner, in 1735, and perhaps it goes back to Joseph Addison and Immanuel Kant and others, or the movement goes back in its origin to the Greeks (Lamarque, 2016).

Generally speaking, aestheticism goes back in origin to the first human existence. Human beings are born with instincts to love and appreciate the real beauty. In the Britain of 19<sup>th</sup> century, and as a result of the industrial revolution with all its corruption, people, especially those of true arts, went to repair the track of the appreciation of beauty; the artists gave a little modified concept of aesthetics. "The Aesthetic Movement in Britain (1860 – 1900) aimed to escape the ugliness and materialism of the Industrial Age, by focusing instead on producing art that was beautiful rather than having a deeper meaning – 'Art for Art's sake'. The artists and designers in this 'cult of beauty' crafted some of the most sophisticated and sensuously beautiful artworks of the Western tradition and in the process remade the domestic world of the British middle-classes" ("An introduction to the Aesthetic Movement" <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/an-introduction-to-the-aesthetic->

movement). The 19<sup>th</sup> century followers of aestheticism in Britain embraced the trend but after making some refinements on it. They took aestheticism in its pure copy based on its credo 'Art for Art's Sake' and dropped the artificial and wrong understanding resulted from the industrial revolution and its material corruption. The British put the trend back on its pure meaning appreciating beauty for its sake and not for other purposes such as morals or other attachments. The aesthetic movement appeared in the arts of the Victorian era and became clear in literature. In our current discussion we focus on Lord Alfred Tennyson of 19<sup>th</sup> century, to see how he looked at that movement and how he reflected it in his poetry. Thus, this paper traces the elements of Aesthetics in Tennyson's poetry.

### **Literature Review**

The first reference to Tennyson as an aesthetic poet appeared in a review written by his faithful friend, Arthur Hallam, appreciated by Le Gallienne who considered it "as tone of the early examples in England' of 'aesthetic criticism'" (Hallam, 1893, p. xxxiv). "The continued publication of the 'Remains' not only kept Hallam's death present, audibly in the title, but also paradoxically kept Tennyson, the aesthetic poet, alive" (Hallam, 1863). Aestheticism is later publicized in English literature by George Brimley when he wrote in his essay 1855 about one of the most eloquent of Tennyson poems, 'The Lotos-Eaters' (1832) which, as he remarked "carries Tennyson's tendency to pure aestheticism to an extreme point." Tennyson, he continued, "is using the word in its relatively recent sense of a philosophy of the beautiful, separated from morality or use, rather than in the strict sense of sensuous perception." The beautiful scenes of the 'The Lotos-Eaters' island with their great waterfalls, attractive and perfumed trees and tasty fruits, lured the visitors to love it and consequently decided to settle there forever. The melody of the sounds of falling water evokes man's sense and his memory leading to high state of pleasure and enjoyment, creating real aesthetic feeling. This sensuous beauty of the island combined with the beautiful form of the poem, words like 'languid air' .... 'slender stream' .... 'Slow-dropping veils of thinnest lawn' as Brimley remarks," evokes Tennyson's formative emotional landscape" ... and carries Tennyson's Tendency "to pure aestheticism to an extreme point', the Valley of Caunteretz with its mountains and cataract, and makes it serve as the landscape of language itself. He continues, Tennyson "is using the word in its relatively recent sense of a philosophy of the beautiful, separated from morality or use, rather than in the strict sense of sensuous perception" (Brimley, pp. 237, 241, 279 & 237).

Tennyson description of nature constitutes an important part of his aesthetics. In Tennyson's 'The Palace of Art,' the speaker is interested in art only for art's sake. In her "lordly pleasure-house,... she devotes herself to every form of beauty... She has become so engrossed in aesthetic pleasures that she excludes the exterior world" (Bycroft, 2003).

Tennyson painted nature with an eye of a painter. In the poem, 'The Lotos-Eaters',

he has given a truly charming picture of nature that brings profound peace, silence and tranquility to our minds. The mariners who have become Lotos-eaters have now taken decision to stay in that island. They do not want to toil any longer. Now they want to enjoy their life taking rest and observing the natural beauty of the Lotos island. They want to enjoy the sweet music of softer waterfalls and want to hear the soft falling of the dews on the crops and grass. The Lotos-Eaters observe the blissful sky and green stones full of mosses in pursuit of real happiness. This description is highly pictorial that only a skilled painter can observe. We can mention some lines in the regard:

There is sweet music here that softer falls  
Than petals from blown roses on the grass,  
Or night-dews on still waters between walls  
Of shadowy granite, in a gleaming pass; (45-48)

The beauty of nature evokes senses and steers up the mind to take courageous action. In 'Ulysses', (1842) Tennyson makes an aesthetic picture when Ulysses describes the evening sky and the Melancholic Ocean at the closing of the day. "The twinkling stars can be seen from behind the hills. The moon is rising slowly up in the sky" (Tennyson, 2022).

Ulysses and her friends through the magic beauty of nature are encouraged to start new voyage to discover a new island, in spite of the dangerous waves, make a noble action. in 'Locksley Hall', (written in 1835 and published in 1842), the aesthetic element "arouses love in the heart of the speaker and his cousin Amy" (Comment on Tennyson's treatment of nature in his poetry, 2018)

In 'Morte D'Arthur,' (1842) Tennyson employs the power of beautiful scenes of nature to evoke the senses that help to categorize it as an aesthetic poem. "Nature for him is always a background for reflecting some human emotion. It carries no message or blessing of its own but harmonizes with the moods of men" (Piash).

To look for traits of aestheticism in Tennyson's poetry, we have to turn our attention more to his lyrical poems which make an important share of his, at least, early poetry where art for art's sake as the emblem of aesthetics is evident. We take 'The Palace of Art' (1832) a man builds it for his 'soul' but void from moral values "where his tragic emotions—sadness, sorrow, despair, and melancholic sensibility—were built into beauty" (Kang,1993).

Aestheticism may show itself in many forms as beauty has many various moods. when the poem steers the mind and creates an emotional state, then it is its completeness or its beauty that affects the mind and makes a response of some kind, whether pleasant or sorrow, it is a real part of aestheticism in Tennyson poetry, as it is suggested, may be shown "as the delineator and representer of tragic emotions" (Horne, 1844, p.249). And "intensely tragic, in pure emotion and deep passion of expression" (Horne, 1844, p. 253). "His intense aesthetic interests come from his melancholic sensibility... his role as an artist was simply

to take the gift of sorrow and clothe it in beauty (Smith, 1964, p.36).

As Smith (1964) points out, "aestheticism provides the withdrawn artist with a temple of beauty in which he may exult in the treasures of the past, the glories of the natural universe in the present, and the plan of continued self-cultivation in the arts for the future" (Smith, 1964, p.57). Kang (1993) remarks in 'Tears, Idle Tears': "there is beautiful and fine, mighty and prophetic emotion and ... fiery passion and deepest pathos; there is imagery abundant and lovely and wonderful; and as to the manifold music one can listen to the free movement and the long cadences of melancholy" (Kang,1993).

Tennyson is considered in his time as the greatest lyricist. Kang cites T. S. Eliot, in 'Essays Ancient and Modern' (2014) saying that "Tennyson is the great master of metric as well as of melancholia. . . the saddest of all English poets" (Eliot, pp. 201-03). He is described as a poet of private "sensation" (Jump, 1967, p. 42) and of "picturesque poetry." (McLuh, 1960, p. 262). Tennyson lyrics is not didactic or made for special moral purpose but rather aesthetic as Kang suggests "For him, poetry is non-utilitarian; it serves no moral or didactic purpose but only an aesthetic one" (Kang, 1993).

'The Hesperides' is another example of aestheticism in Tennyson's poetry. The beautiful touches of landscape led many critics to describe them as pure aesthetic symbols "according to Jerome Buckley, Tennyson's most eloquent defense of a pure poetry isolated from the rude touch of men" (Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet, p. 47). "It is not only separated from the world of men but also from any possible audience" (p. 123). Robert Penn Warren cites Tennyson's "Now sleeps the crimson petal" as an example of the doctrines of pure poetry (Kang, 1993, p.230).

In 'Tears, Idle Tears' (1847) the reader may find that particulate emotion with deep pathos and 'fiery passion' make impressed beauty to put the poem in the line of aestheticism. Similarly, in 'Oenone', (1829) The lady "describes how she fell in love with Paris whom she married and with whom she lived in the most perfect tenderness," (<https://goodstudy.org/oenone-summary/#.YvE7dn1BzIU>). Tennyson makes a wonderful description of the valley that affects the senses of the reader and brings pleasure and happiness to his mind:

There lies a vale in Ida, lovelier  
Than all the valleys of Ionian hills.  
The swimming vapour slopes athwart the glen,  
Puts forth an arm, and creeps from pine to pine,  
And loiters, slowly drawne. On either hand  
The lawns and meadow-ledges midway down  
Hang rich in flowers, and far below them roars  
The long brook falling thro' the clov'n ravine  
In cataract after cataract to the sea (pp. 1-9)

The beauty of the valley where Oenone lives and loves attracts the feeling and creates aesthetic sorrow. Aesthetics appeared most in his well know poems. Here in 'Mariana' (1830) Tennyson through the desolate landscape arouses in the lady's emotion reflected upon herself to experience tragic life that what critics name 'the aesthetic sorrow' where the lady turns into herself to express her grieve:

With blackest moss the flower-plots  
Were thickly crusted, one and all:  
The rusted nails fell from the knots  
That held the pear to the gable-wall.  
The broken sheds look'd sad and strange:  
Unlifted was the clinking latch;  
Weeded and worn the ancient thatch  
Upon the lonely moated grange. (Mariana, pp.1-8)

Notice how the desolated nature affecting the lady's feeling to say later:

She only said, 'My life is dreary,  
He cometh not,' she said;  
She said, 'I am aweary, aweary,  
I would that I were dead!' (Mariana, pp. 9-12)

Kang in his dissertation remarks "'Mariana' is perhaps the first poem of Tennyson's which deliberately recreates a particular and personal emotional state, and yet it is something more than a poem of mood." He continues, "What is important is the evocation of Mariana's psychological state. In the poem Tennyson uses all the evocative devices. He deliberately associates physical environment with sadness and grief" (Kang, 1993).

Following the same line, Tennyson in his poem 'The Palace of Art' (1832) reveals his common motto, Art is for Art's sake, as the base of the aesthetic movement in 18<sup>th</sup> century. The poem can be regarded as a remarkable sign of aesthetics in Tennyson's poetry. Howell observes that the poem gives primer importance to beauty and loving beauty to make it as the main focus or all in all in life so to forget about anything else including the moral duties. Howell says, "'The 'Palace of Art' represents allegorically the condition of a mind which in the love of beauty and the triumphant consciousness of knowledge and intellectual supremacy, in the intense enjoyment of its own power and glory, has lost sight of its relation to man and to God ...'" (p. 508).

Van Dyke in his sermon says, "It was not merely that she loved beauty and music and fragrance; but that in her love she lost her moral sense, denied her human duties..." (Howell, 1936, pp. 507-522). J. Hillis Miller says that the poem shows "guilty self-enclosure in aesthetic beauty" (in Kang, 1993, p.222). The poem may not defer in form from other Tennysonian poems. Kang thinks that, 'The Palace of Art' has the same theme

and follows the same sequence of imitated emotional states in many of his poems. "Each begins with a withdrawal from life into the security of a world without change, a world dominated by frozen emotion" (Kang, 1993).

Music is an important branch of aestheticism. Music can trigger a physical response, as it is the case with the beautiful views of nature. Listening to a beautiful piece of music makes a quick touch on our emotion, leading us to feel pleasure and enjoyment and make us relax and happy. The beauty of music can evoke our emotions and create a physical response. Since Tennyson is a musical poet as he is a sensuous one, he is able throughout his poems to create melodies luring our minds into happiness and pleasure, and that is the function of aesthetics which fulfills the emblem of 'Art is for Art's Sake'. In fact the beautiful natural scene lures the eye, as the good piece of music lures the ear.

Aesthetics in Tennyson's poetry is deep in his musical lines. Marc R. Plamondon in his thesis 'Aesthetics of the Poetry of Tennyson and Browning' (2001) draws the attention to the musical element in Tennyson poetry, he remarks that Tennyson poetry is mostly musical, when it goes to metaphor, melody, tones, songs, and harmony. Plamondon thinks that the aesthetic element in Tennyson's poetry can be shown in that part of his poems, Chiefly Lyrical Poems (1830). In his discussion, he cites Arthur Hallam who in his book refers to Tennyson's poems as 'melodious cadences' and he says in 'The Ballad of Oriana,' the music gives delights to the reader with accompaniment of what is called the delight of the aesthetics. W. J. Fox says: Tennyson is "a master of musical combinations. His songs set themselves, and generate their own tunes." (Jump, 1967, p. 33). Plamondon remarks "the musical nature of Tennyson's verse can be found in almost all of Tennyson's reviews." He cites W. Croker who describes 'The Hesperides', as the "most harmonious of lyrics" (Jump, 1967, p. 77). John Sterling says that 'Fatima' is full of "musical passion" (Jump, 1967, p. 117). R. H. Home says 'the most exquisitely sensuous of Tennyson's characteristics' is "sweetness of melody, and richness of harmony" (Jump, 1967, pp. 155-56) and he continues "Tennyson often writes, or rather sings ... " (Jump, 1967, p. 164).

John Wilson says in the 'Ode to Memory': "There is a fine music there; the versification would be felt delightful to all poetic ears, even if they missed the many meanings of the well-chosen and happily obedient word sound" (Jump, 1967, p. 59). Leigh says, Tennyson "will write you a poem with nothing in it except music, and as if its music were everything, it shall charm your soul... not in reproach, -but in honor of him and of the English language, for the learned sweetness of his numbers " (Jump, 1967, p. 155).

The notion that Tennyson's poetry was so musical that it was not required to carry any meaning grew with the rise of the art for art's sake movement- Edward Campbell Tainsh, in *A Study of the Works of Alfred Tennyson* (1868), says that in Tennyson's later poems, "the music comes altogether spontaneously" (p. 41). Plamondon comments that Tennyson's earlier poems are richer in music: "The poems which I have called Melodies [. . .] are those in which the production of word-music is the chief aim. Some of these are full

of music... It does not mean much; it would not matter if it meant nothing. The tongue loves to utter the words, and the ear rejoices to hear them, and so it is a melody" (p. 40)

The first reference to Tennyson as an aesthetist came from his faithful friend, Arthur Hallam who in his essay (1831), described Tennyson as a poet of sensation. (MacLuhan, 1962) Tennyson "motivated by nothing more than 'the desire of beauty' or by 'the energetic principle of love for the beautiful'" (Leighton). Tennyson in his 'Poems, Chiefly Lyrical' (1830) expressed the "spirit of the modern poetry which is marked by melancholy and a return of the mind upon itself" (Hallam, 1862). The last sentence here may reflect the credo of the aesthetic theory, Art for Art's sake.

Walter Hamilton who listed Tennyson in his book, 'The Aesthetic Movement in England' with Swinburne, Rossetti, Morris, and Wilde, thinks that Tennyson has "the most powerful, undeclared voice of English aestheticism." (Hamilton, 1882) Richard Aldington went farther to say Tennyson is "the chief master of the aesthetes." (Aldington, 1950) 'Art for Art's sake' was known officially in Britain, till the appearance of Victor Cousin translation of 'Lectures on the True, the Beautiful and the Good', where 'art for art's sake' separated from religion and morality. 'The Lotos-Eaters' is given as a good example of Tennyson's aesthetics, as it goes with Hallam's interpretation of how the spirit returns to itself. Brimley (1855) suggests that the poem "carries Tennyson's tendency to pure aestheticism to an extreme point. He is using the word in its relatively recent sense of a philosophy of the beautiful, separated from morality or use, rather than in the strict sense of sensuous perception. Brimley continues, the poem is 'pure aestheticism' and "In particular, he indulges the sonorous effects of 'The Lotos-Eaters', writing, in one place, that its' rhythmical language ... takes the formative impulse of the feeling, as falling water does of the forces that draw it into flashing curve" (p.21).

Pure aestheticism' of 'The Lotos-Eaters' is connected, for Brimley, with that unforming form of the water fall which, like rhythm, marks the physical 'impulse' of writing and connects it with feeling. Brimley seems to perceive, with a formative scene which is also the scene of artistic form:

All along the valley, stream that flashest white,  
Deepening thy voice with the deepening of the night,  
All along the valley, where thy waters flow,  
I walked with one I loved two and thirty years ago.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Tennyson is the poet of music. He is a musician from the first rate. He "offers the nineteenth century one of its most memorable, sensuous, aesthetist voices. It is he who pushes language almost as far as it will go into music, whose rhymes and echoes ring on the other side of sense, who uses refrains and returns like audible embodiments of the tautology of art for art's sake" (Leighton, 2001, p.65). His musical forms are not a "search

for metaphysical self-validation, but a feeling for form as a thing to be held as literally as possible against the threat of formlessness” (Leighton, 2001, p. 65). The charm of sound came to Tennyson from his childhood and “towards the very end of his life he wrote a short poem, specifically for music, called 'Far-Far-Away', in which the repeated phrase mimes its own musically distancing effect” (Leighton, p.71).

Aestheticism is clear not only in 'The Lotos-Eaters' and 'The Palace of Art', but “runs all through his writing, turning up in those islanded moments when beauty, for its own sake, becomes separated from the moral and narrative action of the poem.” (Leighton, 2001, p. 65) Tennyson is highly educated in the meaning of aestheticism. “This aestheticism is not, however, just a matter of sound and sensuousness, it has an ancient and powerful philosophical rationale” (Leighton, 2001, p.65).

Tennyson's embracement of the aestheticism as a philosophical trend is based on his private readings accompanied with his social influence in the Victorian time. Tennyson as a Victorian citizen influenced by 'Marius the Epicurean' published in 1885 by Pater, which makes the base of the aesthetic philosophy diverting man from spiritualism to materialism and to the 'sensuous world' (Leighton, 2001, p. 33).

Tennyson showed deep interest in Lucretius philosophy, and as a result he published his dramatic monologue 'Lucretius' in 1868. Much of Lucretius philosophy appeared in his poems, such as 'The Lover's Tale', 'The Lotos-Eaters'. It is said that “throughout his life Tennyson included Lucretius among his favorite classical poets, and once declared himself, laughingly, a potential convert to the Roman poet's 'heart-crushing atheism' (Leighton, 2001, p.66).

In form, Tennyson's aesthetics can be observed in his poetic forms. The forms of many of his poems show the beauty that reflects the beauty of the content, creating a new perception of what is beautiful. “The idea of a beautiful form is recognized and carried as an aesthetic value and property in the art movement of Aestheticism” (Leighton pp. 223-238). The beauty of form evokes mental process and subsequently triggers a physical response. The form creates the content, and this is what is called 'Drama of form' where the beauty of the form in the poem creates the content or reflects it through its beauty. The creative form came “from the neoclassical theoretical matching of aesthetics with ontology” (Harman, 2018).

In 'Break, Break, Break', Tennyson through the form communicates an aesthetic feeling. “Feelings of melancholy and mourning are mainly constructed on sound and touch images. In this short lyric, Tennyson designs a metrical scheme capable of communicating the poem's matter through its echoes” (Asiatidou, 2021, p.113). “The poetic form of “Break, break, break” which through its aesthetic integrity shapes and determines the content and the value of the poem” (Asiatidou, 2021, pp. 115,113).

In 'Lady of Shallot' “Tennyson also depends on form to create an aesthetic feeling. The melody of the Lady's song excites the feeling of the reapers in a shape to entertain



them. Here the melody of the song interacts with the content, the hardship of the reapers, to arouse mental aesthetics of sorrow. "By describing the reapers' hard working conditions," Harman says, "the poet reinforces the contrast between hard labour and the sense of beauty and calmness that the song of an ethereal existence produces... The poem's aesthetic value partly consists of the beautified coexistence of the conflicting elements by a poetic form that privileges the aesthetic effect" (Harman, 2018, p. 73).

In 'The Splendour Falls on Castle Walls' Tennyson's use of form again creates an aesthetic feeling. The melody of the sounds and the exciting words interacting with the beauty of nature create sensuous feeling "The portrayal of nature in a mystical sense and the alternating levels of light and sounds produce a rhythm of an echo coming back and forth and rich imagery capable of affecting the mood and the feeling" (lines 1-6). The poem changes morals and the social convention for love and beauty. "The poem as a whole "echoes" the perception of love as the human meaning amid the human anxiety of mortality. The topics of human transience, life purpose, and eternity challenge Tennyson's reason. The poet orients the interest towards the beauty of the form, and for him, beauty is in language. Beauty is the matter; thus, words are the matter. He uses words to produce many kinds of pleasure..." (p.115).

Tennyson in 'Ulysses' uses his art to isolate himself from the painful reality. "On a personal level, the poet, through his poem, tries to escape the pain of loss and embrace life as an unknown adventure. Thus, he uses his art to console himself. He escapes from his painful reality through his artistic alienation and creativity... Tennyson's imaginative pursuit reminds Aestheticism's fundamental principle: a socially alienated artist and an artistic creation indifferent towards social obligations or beyond the current reality perception." (p.118) His art in this poem helps him to secure happy life. He uses a creative technique in form to discover beauty; it is by alienating himself from reality. "Such a condition gets along with Aestheticism's view of art as distinct from and indifferent to social life" (Asiatidou, 2021, pp.119-120). "Tennyson's Aestheticism allows art and the artist the freedom of boundless creativity and, thus, the existence of an eternal reality" (p.120). It also allows art to be useless— considering the material tasks of practical life— and reveals the quality of an aesthetic experience as "unusually complete in itself" (Fenner, 2010, p. 98). Tennyson's aestheticism can be observed in his poetic forms as well as in his contents where the beauty of form can reflect the beauty of content which in turn evoke the reader's beautiful images of pleasure and enjoyment so as to serve the function of aestheticism.

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