

THE MARRIAGE MARKET THEME IN TENNYSON'S POETRY SELECTED POEMS

Assist. Lecturer Saad Azeez Salih

Thiqar Education General Directorate - Iraq

Corresponding author: smuhsin406@gmail.com

Abstract:

Through the Victorian age in England, woman suffered a lot and treated as a commodity that was sold to the one who would pay more. It was vital for the rich families to maintain their high esteemed social rank through choosing the right husbands for their daughters. The latter's feelings were not adequately reckoned since they did not have the upright sensible thinking to choose for themselves. The hierarchical order was to be imposed and respected regardless the daughters' prospects. This aroused some concern and sympathy in some literary writers in the Victorian England. Of them was Lord Alfred Tennyson who sustained the woman's cause and exposed her plights. He called for freeing her from the yoke of the rude male's domination so as to enhance her part in society.

Keywords: Marriage, Selected poems, Tennyson's poetry.

INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, the Victorian woman experienced various social sufferings which clearly prevented her from taking part positively in developing her Society. Unfortunately, she was destined to cling completely to man, and comply to his domination. In return, she was rudely treated at home and outside it. She was highly belittled and regarded as an inferior being whose only duty was just to listen and succumb. Her society practised its ferocious dictatorship over her, and handicapped her with its stern inescapable conventions which certainly compelled her to round in man's sphere. Actually, her subjection was not because of her inferior social rank, yet "by her classification as intrinsically inferior by a male dominated culture they could not avoid living in."¹

With regard to law, woman was obviously in many ways below man in social rank. Once considering the husband, we realised that he enjoyed the lawful supremacy over his wife. She had to be grateful and thankful to his mastery. It was a holy duty that "the wife's acknowledgement of her husband's superiority was supposed to be conveyed in humble and respectful forms of address."² Not only did the husband practise his tyrannical role over woman, but the father and brother, too. They deliberately participated in forming that patriarchal system. Man's superiority was upheld through his financial ability of earning subsistence to secure the existence and entity of his family in addition to the legal and religious concepts which were conferred to him by the law and church.

It was her duty to succumb to the man to be a good Christian respectable lady. He was her guardian, therefore she had to conform and comply to his commands and ideals. That is because "this Victorian woman made to believe that morally she was superior to man because her love was chaste; but mentally and physically she was her inferior. She ought to be under male's protection, which in effect meant subjection."³ This might be interpreted by some due to his reasoning



faculties and muscular power that assigned him as her protector on one hand, and her own feebleness and little capacity of reasoning on the other hand.

It is essentially mentioning that one of the most important causes behind the male's high thinking of himself, and his inevitable feeling of his superiority over woman during the Victorian Age, is the Bible. It played that influential role in magnifying male's character, and that he was the origin of creation. Thus, everything ought to submit to him even woman. Such a notion filled him with pride and led him to be snobbish and pompous since he was assigned by God to guide the universe with its components. The Bible affirmed the male's superior status: "Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being."⁴ As man was the origin of creation, this granted him a unique privilege.

All such factors helped a lot to the Victorian degrading outlook towards woman and sustained more and more her inferiority. The male, thus felt that it was his social, legal, and religious responsibility to care for, protect, dominate, and guide her in the right path of life in order to be safe. An obvious example of that was the male's efforts to select an appropriate husband for his daughter or sister. Ostensibly, the middle class woman could not judge or decide for herself properly. Never was she allowed to love as she desired responding to her inner sensations. It was unnecessary for love to be the only sufficient and convincing reason for marriage. In such cases, mind should outdo heart. Sensations should not be unbridled. Hence, fortune was precisely the most vital factor that should be thought of and attained from marriage. The female's family fortune was to be doubled by the marriage from a wealthy husband. It was called "Marriage Market", where woman was bought and sold like a petty commodity. People believed that "by marriage alone a girl could rise to a high rank.... To get ready for marriage market a girl was trained like a race – horse. Her education consisted of showy accomplishments designed to ensnare young men."⁵ Such matrimonial and commercial spirit ignored the girl's deep emotions. It was unfortunate that husbands were almost found for women on the basis of utter barter.

Because of the nature of such commercial marriage with its materialistic mood, and the absence of love for both parties, the husband might be transformed into a real beast. He could possibly treat his wife so rudely as he had had the entire mastery over his household. He might maltreat her by harsh insulting words, and sometimes beat her. Despite that, nobody was to blame him but to excuse him instead. Actually, he was socially and legally sustained. Marriage, for the Victorian middle class, was one relationship of life, love is totally another different one. Love might grow out of marriage, yet "if it did not, the wife tried to assert her rights by her tongue, sometimes with success. But the lordship was held to be vested in the husband, and when he asserted it by fist and stick he was seldom blamed by public opinion."⁶ She was dehumanised as a human being and her dignity was toughly violated though God created her equal to man. Ostensibly, such marriage of convenience and lack of love would inevitably result in sheer failure and psychological destruction at the end.

The theme of marriage market is quite apparent in Tennyson's poem "Locksley Hall". It was written in 1837 – 1838, and was first published in the poems of 1842. The poem expressed the mood of the poet at the time of writing this poem. It was the first attempt of Tennyson to encounter some of the painful of his experiences. Hallam Tennyson mentioned that his father considered this, and the sequel *Locksley Hall Sixty Years After* as "likely to be in the future



two of the most historically interesting of his poems, as descriptive of the tone of the age at two distant periods of his life."⁷ Tennyson did not agree with autobiographical interpretation of the poem and described it an imaginary place with an imaginary protagonist. However, it was believed that from their first publication, "Locksley Hall" had raised the suspicion that they were in one way or another autobiographical. The poem "Locksley Hall" "involved the love of a high – strung, idealistic young man, brooding and inclined to morbidity, for a young woman of wealth and position, and the frustration of that love through the snobbish opposition of the girl's family,"⁸ whose desire to marry her off to a rich man. The girl's life was entirely controlled, and her happiness was destroyed by her familial and social norms.

In "Locksley Hall", the sweet feelings and tender emotions were surging in Amy, the speaker's beloved, and they were true and sincere:

Saying, "Dost thou love me, cousin ?" weeping
I have loved thee long."

The speaker loved her too. Their love was reciprocal. Both lived joyfully together. It was their golden time, the time of rare happiness when every moment was so precious. For them, time passed unnoted:

"Love took up the glass of Time, and turned
It in his Glowing hands;
Every moment, lightly shaken, ran itself in
Golden sand."

(31 – 34)

Their noble feelings and faithful wishes for a mutual happy future were undermined when they were substituted by abnormal and inhuman ones. The natural standards were roughly deformed by wrong and financial levels. Consequently, the family debarred the two lovers from meeting each other and selected a rich men for their daughter. They obliged her to accept him disregarding her will. Notably, marrying a woman on materialistic bases, would definitely embed real passions and emotions. By committing that, man would regard her as "something better than his dog, a little dearer than his horse."⁹ Always, the sole miserable and suppressed victim who had to suffer was the woman whose will was entirely abolished. Her entity and personality were almost confiscated and obliterated and she was devaluated as a human being. She was the weakling in the grip of the mighty man who never realised her importance as an essential part of society. It was the crowning race in which every sex had his or her own role to play, and complement the other to establish a blissful and balanced society. The poem was a real protest against a rigid society that established artificial barriers, discriminating people on financial basis prohibiting individuals from materialising their love:

"Cursed be the social wants that sin against
The strength of youth !
Cursed be the social lies that warp us from



The living truth !
 Cursed be the sickly forms that err from
 Honest Nature's rule !
 Cursed be the gold that gilds the straitened
 Forehead of the fool !"

(57 – 64)

Amy realised that her separation of her lover was "the result more of her parents' demands than of her own volition."¹⁰ However, women might sometimes be feeble with a shallow heart, especially when allowed "to be bullied by their parents into marrying moneyed fools."¹¹ In this case, they were just like puppets to the threat of their fathers, and compliant to his bitter tongue.

Again, the same theme was prevalent and reiterated in other poems such as "Aylmer's Field" (1864) treated the woman's hopelessness in a male dominated society where woman was maltreated as an low creature who could not help or save herself. The society believed that she was incapable to choose the proper man as a husband since she was dominated by her immature sensations and innocence, therefore the sole option was her family's choice of a well – to – do husband. Seemingly, the poem had some relation with Tennyson's earlier life as a lover, when he had been refused for his social and financial reasons. "Aylmer's Field" was named after the funeral sermon preached at the burial of the only girl of a rich Suffolk baronet, condemning the pride and gluttony of her parents. It was the story of a relationship between the heiress Edith Aylmer and Leolin Everill, the struggling poor lawyer or barrister. They loved each other, yet their love was "threatened and obliterated by the snobbery and pride of Sir Aylmer"¹² due to the materialistic world he lived in. Love, justice, and humanity were lost.

Like "Locksley Hall", "Aylmer's Field" delineated the tough circumstances of the lovers. Tennyson abhorred relations and marriage established on financial interests, wealth, and social said of his status. Hallam Tennyson said of his father: "My father always felt a profit Righteous wrath against this form of selfishness, and no one can read his terrible denunciation of such pride trampling on a holy Human love, without being aware that the poet's heart burnt within him while at work on his tale of wrong."¹³

The differences in social status demarcated the harmonious relation between the two lovers, Edith and Leolin, especially when grew up. To separate them, and to her father's grudge, he separated them by dispatching Leolin to London to study law and prohibited him from seeing his beloved, Edith, again. She spent her coming days like a prisoner in solitude thinking and recalling their bygone memories. Unfortunately, their love did not last long because of Edith's father's snobbery and cruelty. Regretfully, his tyranny led him to Edith's death and Leolin's suicide. Tennyson obviously stated that true love could never survive in a sheer materialistic world. It was the wealth and the social position that played the most vital role not love. In Tennyson's view, Sir Aylmer and his wife deserved contempt and repulsion. He described them disgustingly thus:

"Sir Aylmer Aylmer, that Almighty man,
 The county God – in whose Capacious hall,



Hung with a hundred shields, the family tree
 Sprang from the midriff of a prostrate king –
 Whose blazing wyvern weathercock'd the spire,
 Stood from his walls and wing'd his entry - gates
 And swang besides on a many a windy sign –
 Whose eyes from under a pyramidal head
 Saw from his windows Nothing save his own –
 What lovelier of his own had he than her.
 His only child, his Edith, whom he loved
 As heiress and not heir regretfully ?
 But he that marries her marries her name,
 This fiat somewhat soothed himself and wife,
 His wife a faded beauty of the baths,
 Insipid as the Queen upon a card;
 Her all of thought and bearing hardly more
 Than his own shadow in a sickly sun."¹⁴

The lineage pride as well as wealth the poem opened and concluded with was real selfishness and hypocrisy about which the Arnold felt "a prophet's righteous wrath" (iii. 252) when it ignored holy love. Sir Aylmer was "monstrous caricature of vanity and avarice, his wife is a paragon of snobbish stupidity."¹⁵ He and his wife destroyed their daughter's aspirations of marrying Leolin.

The Aylmers were part of a rich social class who "swore / Not by the temple but the gold, and made / Their own traditions God, and slew the Lord."¹⁶ (I. 114 – 116). The love of money was deeply rooted in their souls that it turned to be a curse on their sole daughter. Sir Aylmer believed that Leolin ran after his daughter's fortune. Consequently, he warned him from proceeding:

"... Last he said
 Boy, Mark me ! for your fortunes are to make.
 I swear you shall not make them out of mine."
 (I. 320 – 322)

Sir Aylmer went farther when he menaced to lash and kick Leolin out:

"Boy should I find you by my doors again,
 My men shall lash you from the like a dog."
 (I. 348 – 349)

But Edith deeply believed that Leolin would certainly keep his sincere promise of love, defying the peril and never relinquish her:

"... I
 So foul a traitor to myself and he
 Never oh never."



(I. 330 – 333)

Seemingly, Edith was one of the desperate victims of vicious mammon, a victim whose feelings were vehemently persecuted. Oppression reached a maximum limit that she and her lover almost collapsed with bitter tears:

"... the wind
The rain of heaven, and their own bitter tears,
Tears, and the careless rain of heaven, mixed
Upon their faces, as they kiss'd each other
In darkness, and above them roar'd the pine."

(II. 232 – 236)

The Aylmers thought that what they were doing , was in fact in favour of their daughter, and that she had no right to object. For them, the rational reason should overstep the vapid emotions of the heart. On her part, Edith remained loyal and made her mind not to quit her love:

"In agony, she promised that no force,
Persuasion, no, nor death could alter her."

(II. 317 – 318)

The consequences of Edith's parents' oppression was nothing save the shriek of death which reverberated in the corners of their hall, a death which overshadowed the whole place and turned it into absolute desolation. However, after Edith's death, the Aylmers family was befallen with sorrow, havoc, and misery. They, finally realised the disastrous outcome of their dreadful deed and vanity. As a result, Lady Aylmer died out of grief, and Sir Aylmer went imbecile. Even their ideal hall which had been the ensign of their snobbishness, collapsed and haunted by animals and small insects instead:

"Then the great Hall was wholly broken down,
And the broad Woodland parcell'd into farms
And where the two contrived their daughter's good,
Lies the hawk's cast, the mole has made his run,
The hedgehog underneath the plaintain bores,
The rabbit fondles his own harmless face,
The slow – worm creeps and the thin weasel there
Follows the mouse, and all is open field."

(II. 846 – 853)

The poem became an impressive performance, which successfully showed Tennyson's passionate fury at the thought of young love thwarted by parental pride and avarice. The idea which is clearly emphasised is that "... if the old were too reactionary, and the young sought a radical change, the result would be generally disastrous."¹⁷ However, for the parents, the old social conventions should be respected, preserved, and sanctified. Yet, that was not right since the young had also their own dreams, aspirations, and ambitions. Change was required, gradual rather abrupt



which was finally inevitable.

Notably, Tennyson was so much interested in such a theme which was common in other poems like "Edwin Morris". Tennyson began writing this poem in 1839 after writing "Locksley Hall". The poem "Edwin Morris" opened with the speaker's memories of his past friendship with Edwin Morris, a poet, and the fat - faced clergy, Edward Bull. The Story was about the poor landscape painter's love for the girl he loved, Letty Hill. The Hill family were "new – comers in an ancient hold, / New – comers from the Mersey, millionaires."¹⁸ Their house was "a Tudor – chimnied bulk / of mellow brickwork on an isle of bowers." (11 – 12) They belonged to an aristocratic social class. It was impossible for such a poor man to thrust into or raise himself to their world and social rank. But, the two lovers did not heed such obstacles. for them, love had a tremendous power which could exceed and overstep any artificial limits bringing hearts closer to each other in full harmony and coherence. Consequently, they kept on their clandestine meetings ignoring the danger that besieged them:

"And out I slept, and up I crept: she moved,
 Like Paradise in Enna, gathering flowers
 Then low and sweet I whistled thrice; and she,
 She turn'd, we closed, we kiss'd, swore faith, I breathed
 In some new planet."

(111 – 115)

Their love affair was gloomily came to its end by the rigid values of the totalitarian materialism ostensibly represented by Letty's cousin, aunts, and uncles. Seemingly, not only did the parents played a dictatorial role in shaping her life, but the relatives, too, to whom she should comply with their orientation. Though Letty was not an orphan, her relatives were her trustees or guardians in full mandate. It was a real plight which was beyond the lovers' manipulation, and so critical a situation which they could never avoid. Death was the inevitable truth for their love. Letty, to her fear, asked the lover to depart immediately in order not to be harmed, however, he was audacious and valourous enough to face them:

"... a silent cousin stole
 Upon us and departed: " Leave," she cried,
 "Oh leave me ! " " Never, dearest, never: here
 I brave the worst:"

(115 – 118)

All Letty's aunts and uncles with their hounds gathered to chase the miserable lovers and prevent their meeting:

"... and while we stood like fools
 Embracing, all at once a score of pugs
 And poodles yell'd within, and out they came
 Trustees and Aunts and uncle. " What, with him !"
 "Go" (shrill'd the cottonspinning chorus) "Him !"



Again with hands of wild rejection" Go ! –
 Girl, get you in ! "she went,"
 (119 – 126)

To her parents cruelty, they wedded her to Sir Robert, a rich man of sixty thousand pounds with large estates with whom Letty never shared any affections. Her whole life was sold like a trivial commodity to the person who paid more in ignorance of her real feelings and sentiments:

"... and in one month
 They wedded her to sixty thousand pounds,
 To lands in Kent and messuages in York,
 And slight Sir Robert with his watery smile
 And educated whisker."

(127 – 131)

In short, it was conspicuous that women's feelings were ignored mostly in the Victorian materialistic society. Parents thought of establishing a wealthy and bright future for their daughters, though it was a kind of oppression. Men believed that women sometimes were incapable of formulating a happy and promising future. Hence, it was their career, they thought, to plan and act on their behalf. Women's dreams and hopes were not of substantial importance for they were naïve and elusive. Money, only, could safeguard their future and existence, raise their social rank and prestige and fill their lives with joy and peace.

Conclusion

Through the Victorian age in England, woman suffered a lot and treated as a commodity that was sold to the one who would pay more. It was vital for the rich families to maintain their high esteemed social rank through choosing the right husbands for their daughters. The latter's feelings were not adequately reckoned since they did not have the upright sensible thinking to choose for themselves. The hierarchical order was to be imposed and respected regardless the daughters' prospects. This aroused some concern and sympathy in some literary writers in the Victorian England. Of them was Lord Alfred Tennyson who sustained the woman's cause and exposed her plights. He called for freeing her from the yoke of the rude male's domination so as to enhance her part in society.

The poems "Locksley Hall", "Aylmer's Field", and "Edwin Morris" exhibited the idea of class distinction, desperate and futile love, and marriage market. Remarkably, love was doomed to utter failure between the two socially contradicted partners. Tennyson objected and proclaimed his protest and condemnation against such rude norms. He emphasized the idea that love and only love that should prevail. Money would not necessarily bring bliss to man and woman in their affair. Love should outdo other vapid matters. Woman, he believed, really needed serious trials to be saved and maintain her dignity.

Notes

¹k.k. Ruthven, *Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 44.



²John Stuart Mill, “ The Subjection of Women ”, *The Feminist Papers*, ed. Alice S. Rossi (New York: Colombia University Press, 1973), p. 42.

³Amy A. Kandela, *Tennyson's Idea of Woman in Relation to Contemporary and Eastern Influences* (unpublished dissertation (Dundee: University of Dundee, 1975), pp. 84 – 85.

⁴K.K. Ruthven, p. 45.

⁵Ibid., p. 52.

⁶Wanda F. Neff, *Victorian Working Women: An Historical and Literary Study of Women in British Industries and Professions 1832 – 1850* (New York: Frank Cass & Co., Ltd., 1966), pp. 299 – 210.

⁷K.K. Ruthven, p. 63.

⁸Wanda F. Neff, p. 215.

⁹Harold Bloom, ed., *Modern Critical Views: Alfred Lord Tennyson* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985), p. 152.

¹⁰John Killham, ed., *Critical Essays on the Poetry of Tennyson* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), p. 73.

¹¹T. Herbert Warren, ed. *The works of Alfred Lord Tennyson* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1899), pp. 29 – 30.

¹²Hallam Lord Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson, Memoir I* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1897), p. 247.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ralph Wilson Rader, *Tennyson's Maud: The Biographical Genesis* (California: University of California Press Ltd., 1963), p. 63.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 64.

¹⁶Ryals Clyde, *Theme and Symbol in Tennyson's Poems to 1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), p. 156.

¹⁷Peter F. Mullan, *The Victorian Poets* (New York: Keane Mullany, Thor Publications, Inc., 1963), p. 19.

¹⁸Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 156 – 157.

References

1. Bloom, Harold, ed. *Modern Critical Views: Alfred Lord Tennyson*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985.
2. Clyde, Ryals. *Theme and Symbol in Tennyson's Poems to 1850*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964.
3. Hamilton, Jerome Buckley. *Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967.
4. Herbert T. Warren, ed., *The works of Alfred Lord Tennyson*. New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1899.
5. Candela, Amy. A. *Tennyson's Idea of Woman in Relation to Contemporary and Eastern Influences*. Unpublished dissertation Dundee: University of Dundee, 1975.
6. Killham, John, ed., *Critical Essays on the Poetry of Tennyson*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960.



7. Mullan, Peter F. *The Victorian Poets*. New York: Keane Mullany, Thor Publication, INC., 1963.
8. Neff, Wanda F. *Victorian Working Women: An Historian and Literary Study of Women in British Industries and Professions 1832 – 1850*. New York Frank Cass &Co., Ltd., 1966.
9. Ruthven, K.K. *Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
10. Stuart, John Mill. *The subjection of Women*. New York: Colombia University Press, 1973.
11. Tennyson, Hallam. *Alfred Lord Tennyson, Memoir*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1897.
12. Wilson, Ralph Rader. *Tennyson's Maud: The Biographical Genesis*. California: University of California Press Ltd., 1963.

