James Dickey Vs. Tennyson Essay, Research Paper

James Dickey’s “On the Hill Below the Lighthouse” best reminds me of the Lord

Alfred Tennyson. Upon first reading Dickey’s poem, a deep yearning and sentimental

emotion is achieved. There is a great sense of not regret but of something that the

narrator longs for. This can be seen in the last stanza of the poem.

“Now that I can be sure of my sleep;

The moon is held strongly within it.

A woman comes true when I think her.

Shade swings, and she lies against me.

Let us lie in the returning light;

Let us lie where your angel is walking,

Coming back, coming back, going over.”

It is not until this last stanza that I completely feel the concept of nostalgia. Here it can

be seen that there was once a woman that the narrator had deep feelings for and he recalls

how she used to lie next to him in the light of the lighthouse’s beam. The last line,

“coming back, coming back, going over” is almost like a unifying device for the whole

poem. It almost seems that the narrator is recalling the woman that was from his past and

replaying the whole scene of when they were together in his head all over again.

And it is also this quality of recollection that has reminded so much of Tennyson.

In Tennyson’s “Tears, Idle Tears,” a strong sense of nostalgia is perceived. In the last

line of every stanza there are the words, “…the days that are no more.” This appears to be

the unifying device that connects this poem together. However, in this poem, there seems

to be a sense of regret. Unlike Dickey’s poem, this poem is much more sad and more

depressing. It appears that this poem was the reaction of the death of a loved one.

Tennyson explains in his first stanza that as he looks into the autumn fields, he recalls of

happy days with a loved one that will no longer happen anymore.

“Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,

Tears from the depth of some divine despair

Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,

In looking on the happy autumn fields,

And thinking of the days that are no more.”

Both poems do not contain any hope in relationships because there longer are any

relationships. In both “On the Hill Below the Lighthouse” and “Tears, Idle tears” there

is only the memory of the loved one that is inside the heart. Both poems are passionate in

a different aspect. Dickey’s poem seems to be more of a contemproary approach. There

is not as much regret as there is in Tennyson’s poem. However, there is more desire or

remembering in Dickey’s poem. This can be achieved from the last line of the stanza,

“Coming back, coming back, going over.” And in “Tears, Idle Tears,” there is

remembrance only when something that reminds of the narrator appears or happens, “in

looking on the happy autumn fields, and thinking of the days that are no more.”

Nature is something that strong in both poems, although there is more imagination

in Dickey’s poem. “The lighthouse has opened its brain” and “a bright arm sweeps

through the moon” are very creative personifications. Yet it also these lines that help to

create the setting for the poem. In “Tears, Idle Tears,” it is the “autumn fields, summer

dawns, half-awakened birds” that help create the background. The language in both poem

are sad but not depressing. The language is simple and flowing. One would not have

trouble reading any of the two poems.

The two pieces of work that I chose from the Victorian packet are “My Last

Duchess” and “The Lady of Shalott.” I have connected these two poems based on the

story-like quality. “The Lady of Shalott” reads like a story that has some melody in it.

The rhyming scheme is that the first four lines of each stanza rhyme, then the fifth and

ninth line rhyme, leaving the sixth through eighth lines rhyming. Upon reading this poem,

it almost seems more like a fairy-tale than a poem. The Lady of Shallot appears to be the

dame in distress and Sir Lancelot is the hero that will rescue her. Lady of Shallot is cursed

in that she can only see the world through her mirror. If she were to look down to

Camelot, she would die.

“A curse is on her if she stay

To look down to Camelot.

She know not what the curse may be” (40-42)

However, one day “she left the web, she left the loom, she made three paces

through the room, she saw the water lily bloom, she saw the helmet and the plume, She

looked down to Camelot.” (ln 109-113) Lady Shalott breaks the curse and sees things

through her own eyes rather than through the mirror. Nonetheless, Lady Shalott slowly

begins to die.

“Till her blood was frozen slowly,

And her eyes were darkened wholly,

Turned to towered Camelot.

For ere she reached upon the tide

The first house by the waterside,

Singing in her song she died,

The Lady of Shalott”

(147-153)

In “My Last Duchess,” it is read like a prose but it is put into poetic form.

However, “My Last Duchess,” in a dramatic monologue rather than a poem. A dramatic

monologue is a kind of narrative poem in which one character speaks to one or more

listeners who replies are not given in the poem. Here, the Duke Ferrara is speaking to an

envoy about his first, who is apparently dead. From what the Duke is telling the envoy,

one can conclude that the Duke is arrogant, domineering, and very insecure about his

relationship. It appears that the Duke would only tolerate the Duchess attending to him.

“… ‘twas not

Her husband presence only, called that spot

Of joy into the Duchess’ cheek

(13-15)

The Duchess is portrayed as someone that is easily pleased.

“A heart–shall I say?–too soon made glad,

Too easily impressed; she liked whate’er

She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.”

(22-24)

The character of the Duke is established as one of a man who believes that his is the

center of the universe. This man does not accept anything less than being seen as exactly

that, the center of the universe.

There are many story-like qualities in “The Lady of Shalott.” First of all, as I had

noted before, this poem reads like a fairy tale. There is the so-called castle, “four gray

wall, and four gray towers.” (ln 15-16) There is the plot of the Lady of Shalott being the

dame in distress and Sir Lancelot being the hero. There is the trial of how Lady of Shalott

is bound by a curse that she cannot look down onto Camelot as Sleeping Beauty is cursed

by an evil witch that she will sleep forever. There are the horses, knights, shields, helmets,

magical powers (the images she sees through the mirror). However, unlike a fairy-tale,

this tale does not end happily ever after. Instead the dame dies.

“My Last Duchess” reads like a short story. The main characters of the story are

The Duke Ferrara, the Duchess, and the envoy that the Duke is talking to. Although there

was no apparent crime that tool place but the antagonist is the Duke Ferrara and the

protagonist is the Duchess. I believe that the Duke has either killed the Duchess himself

or has ordered someone to kill her, therefore making him the evil person. The Duchess is

the protagonist because she died innocently through no fault of her own. The story is

about how the Duke talks about the things that he dislikes about the Duchess. From this

we see the faults of the Duke. The setting takes place in the Duke’s house during the 16th

century in the city of Ferrara in northern Italy. The theme of this story is still uncertain to

me. It is known that this was a true story but why it was written is still a mystery. Maybe

it was written to warn other Duchesses to avoid behaving like this Duchess to prevent

death. Or maybe it was written so that people would know about the insecurity and the

jealousy of the Duke.

One similar happening in both stories is that the female dies in the end. Although it

does not specifically state that the Duchess dies in “My Last Duchess,” it can be guessed

that she does. “Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands; Then all smiles

stopped together.” (ln 45-46) And it is stated in “The Lady Shalott” that she dies.