

Poetry
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Alfred, Lord Tennyson

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Lord Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892)



- Historical and Literary Context
- Lord Tennyson
- Tithonus Myth
- "Tithonus"
- Analysis
- A Revisionary Reading
- An Intertextual Reading



The first Victorian poet that we want to discuss is Lord Alfred Tennyson, born in 1809, and died in 1892. As usual, we will see the historical and literary context in which Lord Tennyson wrote his poems. We pay attention to his poem Tithonus, so we will understand Tithonus Myth, analyze the poem, offer two readings, a revisionary reading, and an intertextual reading.

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Historical and Literary Context



- William IV (1830-1837)
- Queen Victoria (1837-1901)
- Social Reforms – slavery, child labor, human rights, women and their emancipation
- Rise and Fall of Romanticism and Victorianism
- Popularity of Wordsworth and lyric poetry
- Growth of Dramatic Monologue and Browning
- Death of Arthur Henry Hallam and Prince Albert in 1833 and 1861, respectively
- Writing/ Reading therapy for Tennyson and Q Victoria
- Celebration of melancholy, *In Memoriam* (1850)



Here is a historical and literary context. William IV was ruling this country from 1830 to 1837. Then comes Queen Victoria, who ruled Britain for a long time, from 1837 to 1901. During this period, many social reforms took place regarding slavery, child labor, human rights, women, and their emancipation. We see the rise and fall of both romanticism and Victorianism at this time. The popularity of Wordsworth and lyric poetry continued in this period through Tennyson.

At the same time, we find the growth of dramatic monologue in Tennyson and primarily in Browning. In the case of Tennyson, he faced a tragedy in his life that is the death of Arthur Henry Hallam, his one friend. And then, in the life of Queen Victoria, she faced a major tragedy in her life that is, Prince Albert died in 1861. Because of these kinds of tragedies, we find writing and reading became a therapy for Tennyson, and also Queen Victoria. That means the writer as well as the reader. We have a celebration of melancholy, sadness in Tennyson's most famous poem, *In Memoriam* published in 1850.

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Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)



- Why is Tennyson called Lord Tennyson?
- Tennyson became Lord, Alfred, Tennyson at 75 in 1883.
- Devoted to poetry from a young age and published *Poems by Two Brothers* in 1827
- Traumatic experiences due to poor finance and health
- Unable to complete his education at Cambridge
- Determined to continue writing poetry all his life
- Loss of his friend Arthur Henry Hallam in 1833
- Wrote his elegy *In Memoriam* over 17 years, published it in 1850 and became the poet laureate after Wordsworth
- Continued the tradition of Wordsworth's lyric poetry with a dramatic touch and nostalgia about the past
- Best remembered for his melodious poems: "Ulysses," "Tithonus," "The Lady of Shallot," "Mariana," "The Eagle"



Let us learn a few more details about Lord Tennyson. Why is Tennyson called Lord Tennyson? This is a question that may be of some interest to some of us. Because we deal with poetry. What can poetry do? we may ask a question and then answer that question through this example. Alfred Tennyson could become Lord Alfred Tennyson because of this poetry, which brought him fame and name, which impressed the whole of English people at that time.

Tennyson was devoted to poetry from a young age and published his volume, *Poems by Two Brothers* in 1827. He went through traumatic experiences due to poor finance and his own poor health. He was unable to complete his education at Cambridge because of financial difficulties. He was, however, determined to continue writing poetry all his life, he never stopped writing.

This loss of his friend Arthur Henry Hallam affected him so deeply in 1833, that he was writing a poem in memory of his friend for such a long time, that is 17 years. This is a long elegy in English literature. It was published in 1850 and later on, this helped him to become this poet laureate of England after Wordsworth. Tennyson continued the tradition of Wordsworth's poetry with a dramatic touch and nostalgia about the past. Tennyson is best remembered for his melodious poems like *Ulysses*, *Tithonus*. *The Lady of Shallot*, *Mariana*, *The Eagle*, and so many others.

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Tithonus Myth

- Tithonus – Greek myth
- A prince of Troy – a human being with consciousness
- Son of King Laomedon by the nymph Strymo
- A lover of Eos/Aurora, goddess of dawn
- Eos abducted the mortal Tithonus
- Got immortality for him from Zeus
- Forgot about immortal youth
- Tithonus suffers endlessly seeking death.
- Eos finally transformed him into a cicada.
- A **cicada** – an animal without consciousness
- Man or animal, when dead, is the same dust/earth.



The poem we have chosen is called Tithonus and it is based on a myth, so it is good for us to understand what this myth is all about. This is a Greek myth. Tithonus was a prince of Troy and he was a human being with consciousness, mind. He was the son of King Laomedon by the name Strymon. He became a lover of Aurora or Eos, the goddess of dawn. This goddess of dawn abducted the mortal Tithonus, because she was so much in love with Tithonus. Tithonus got immortality for him from Zeus through Aurora. But he forgot to ask about immortal youth. So Tithonus suffers endlessly desiring death.

Eos or Aurora, finally transformed him into a ‘cicada’ that is an insect. We have the picture of that insect cicada here. A cicada is an insect without consciousness, from man with consciousness, to an insect without consciousness. That is the kind of degeneration we notice in this myth. Man or animal, when dead is a same dust or earth, but in the case of Tithonus, he is prevented from dying because of this blessing from Zeus through Eos. Eos is the Greek name. Aurora is a Roman name.

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Tithonus-I



The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,
Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,
And after many a summer dies the swan.
Me only **cruel immortality** 5
Consumes: I wither slowly in thine arms,
Here at the quiet limit of the world,
A white-hair'd shadow roaming **like a dream**
The ever-silent spaces of the East,
Far-folded mists, and gleaming halls of morn. 10



Now, let us read this poem, ‘Tithonus.’ We have put them in separate slides for a sake of convenience, but it is a long poem, one long poem actually.

“The woods decay, the woods decay, and fall,

The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,

Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,

And after many summer dies a swan.

Me only **cruel immortality** 5

Consumes: I wither slowly in thine arms,

Here at the quiet limit of the world,

A white-hair'd shadow roaming **like a dream,**

The ever-silent spaces of the East,

Far-folded mists and gleaming halls of morn.” 10

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Tithonus-II



Alas! for this gray shadow, once a man—
So glorious in his beauty and thy choice,
Who madest him thy chosen, that he seem'd
To his great heart none other than a God!
I ask'd thee, 'Give me immortality.' 15
Then didst thou grant mine asking with a smile,
Like wealthy men, who care not how they give.
But thy **strong Hours** indignant work'd their wills,
And beat me down and marr'd and wasted me,
And tho' they could not end me, left me maim'd 20



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And beat me down and marr'd and wasted me,
And tho' they could not end me left me maim'd.” 20

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Tithonus-II



To dwell in presence of immortal youth,
Immortal age beside immortal youth,
And all I was, in ashes. Can thy love,
Thy beauty, make amends, tho' even now,
Close over us, the silver star, thy guide, 25
Shines in those tremulous eyes that fill with tears
To hear me? Let me go: take back thy gift:
Why should a man desire in any way
To vary from the kindly race of men
Or pass beyond the goal of ordinance 30
Where all should pause, as is most meet for all?



“To dwell in presence of immortal youth,

Immortal age beside immortal youth,

And all I was, in ashes. Can thy love,

Thy beauty, make amends, tho' even now,

Close over us, the silver star, thy guide, 25

Shines in those tremulous eyes that fill with tears

To hear me? Let me go: take back thy gift:

Why should a man desire in any way

To vary from the kindly of race of men

Or pass beyond the goal of ordinance 30

Where all should pause, as is most meet for all?

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Tithonus-III



A soft air fans the cloud apart; there comes
A glimpse of that dark world where I was born.
Once more the old mysterious glimmer steals
From thy pure brows, and from thy shoulders pure, 35
And bosom beating with a heart renew'd.
Thy cheek begins to redden thro' the gloom,
Thy sweet eyes brighten slowly close to mine,
Ere yet they blind the stars, and the wild team
Which love thee, yearning for thy yoke, arise, 40
And shake the darkness from their loosen'd manes,
And beat the twilight into flakes of fire.



“A soft air fans the cloud apart; there comes
A glimpse of the dark world where I was born.
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From thy pure brows, and from thy shoulders pure, 35
And bosom beating with the heart renew'd.
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And shake the darkness from their loosen'd manes,
And beat the twilight into flakes of fire.”

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Tithnous – IV, V & VI

Lo! ever thus thou growest beautiful
In silence, then before thine answer given
Departest, and thy tears are on my cheek. 45

Why wilt thou ever scare me with thy tears,
And make me tremble lest a saying learnt,
In days far-off, on that dark earth, be true?
'The Gods themselves cannot recall their gifts.'

Ay me! ay me! with what another heart 50
In days far-off, and with what other eyes



Here we have the IV, V, and VI verse paragraphs.

“Lo! ever thus thou growest beautiful
In silence, then before thine answer given
Departest, and thy tears are on my cheek.

Why will thou ever scare me with thy tears,
And make me tremble lest a saying learnt,
In days far-off, on that dark earth, be true?
'The Gods themselves cannot recall their gifts.'
Ay me! ay me! with what another heart
In days for-off, and with what other eyes.

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Tithonus -VI



I used to watch—if I be he that watch'd—
The lucid outline forming round thee; saw
The dim curls kindle into sunny rings;
Changed with thy mystic change, and felt my blood 55
Glow with the glow that slowly crimson'd all
Thy presence and thy portals, while I lay,
Mouth, forehead, eyelids, growing dewy-warm
With kisses balmier than half-opening buds
Of April, and could hear the lips that kiss'd 60
Whispering I knew not what of wild and sweet,
Like that strange song I heard Apollo sing,
While Ilion like a mist rose into towers.



“I used to watch- if I be he that watch'd-
The lucid outline forming round thee; saw
The dim curls kindle into sunny rings;
Changed with thy mystic change, and felt my blood
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like that strange song I heard Apollo sing,
While Ilion like a mist rose into towers.”

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Tithonus - VII

Yet hold me not for ever in thine East:
How can my nature longer mix with thine? 65
Coldly thy rosy shadows bathe me, **cold**
Are all thy lights, and **cold** my wrinkled feet
Upon thy glimmering thresholds, when the steam
Floats up from those dim fields about the homes
Of happy men that have the power to die, 70
And grassy barrows of the happier dead.
Release me, and restore me to the ground;
Thou seest all things, thou wilt see my grave:
Thou wilt renew thy beauty morn by morn;
I earth in earth forget these empty courts, 75
And thee returning on thy silver wheels.



This is the last section.

“Yet hold me not for ever in thine East;
How can my nature longer mix with thine?
Coldly thy rosy shadows bathe me, **cold**
Are all thy lights, and **cold** my wrinkled feet
Upon thy glimmering thresholds, when the stream
Floats up from those dim fields about the homes
Of happy men that have the power to die,
And grassy barrows of the happier dead.
Release me, and restore me to the ground;
Thou seest all things, thou wilt see my grave;
Thou wilt renew thy beauty morn by morn;
I earth in earth forget these empty courts
And these returning on thy silver wheels.”

Here is a man Tithonus, who became the object of love for a goddess, became immortal, but did not have this immortal youth. And so, we have the anguish of this man, he wants to die. Earlier, he wanted to be immortal. Now, he wants to die, but he cannot. So he cries for release from this old age, old body.

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Thematic Contrast

- Nature and Human beings
- Growth and Decay
- Mortality and Immortality
- Man and Woman
- White and Black
- East and West
- Old age and Youth
- Dream and Reality
- Silence and Speech
- Past and Present
- Mutability and Immutability



The thematic contrast we have in this poem is as follows. Nature, on the one hand, human beings on the other, growth and decay, mortality and immortality, man and woman, white and black, east and west, old age and youth, dream and reality, silence and speech, past and present, mutability and immutability: mutability is change, immutability is unchanging nature. The immortal nature, unchanging nature is the burden for Tithonus.

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Poetic Devices



- **Narration:** The speaker reflects on time in a story form
- **Apostrophe:** The speaker addresses Eos/ Aurora, the goddess of dawn; hence an aubade, a song of dawn
- **Simile:**
Like wealthy men, who care not how they give. (17)
- **Personification:**
But thy strong Hours indignant work'd their wills, (18)
- **Alliteration:**
Like that strange song I heard Apollo sing, (62)
- **Rhetorical Question:**
How can my nature longer mix with thine? (65)



There are many poetic devices in this poem. It is actually a narration. It is a lyrical narration, if you want to say, we can say that. The speaker reflects on time in a story form. The apostrophe is there. The speaker addresses Eos or Aurora, the goddess of dawn. Hence, it is also called an aubade that is, a song of dawn. Because the poem deals with a situation in the dawn, early morning.

We have the simile in, 'like wealthy men who care not how they give.' We have to understand, whenever we give something we have to know the consequences of giving. That is the beautiful simile we have. Personification, we have in, 'strong hours:' 'But thy strong Hours indignant work'd their wills.' Alliteration, we have in, 'like that strange song I heard Apollo sing:' Sa, sa, sing. Rhetorical question we have in, 'how can my nature longer mix with thine?' No, they cannot. Human is human, divine is divine.

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter

Seven verse paragraphs, 76 lines

Rhyme: unrhymed

Repetition: the woods decay (1), immortal youth (21-22), cold (66-67)

Caesura, Enjambment, and End-stopped lines:

Alas! | for this | gray sha | dow, once | a man —

So glo | rious in | his beau | ty and | thy choice,

Who ma | dest him | thy cho | sen, that | he seem'd

To his | great heart | none o | ther than | a God! (11-14)

Meter: iambic pentameter

Variation: Spondee: gray shad; Pyrrhic: to his



We have rhyme, rhythm, and meter in this. Seven verse paragraphs actually, totally 76 lines we have. The whole poem is unrhymed. However, we have some repetitions which add to the beauty of this poem: ‘The woods decay, the woods decay; immortal youth, immortal youth; cold, cold,’ and many others are there. Here, we have some examples like this.

Then we have caesura, enjambment and end-stopped lines from this passage. We can find such passages throughout the poem. Just for the sake of example, we have this here :

“Alas! for this gray shadow, once a man

So glorious in his beauty and thy choice,

Who madest him thy chosen, that he seem’d

To his great heart none other than a God.” (11-14)

The meter is iambic pentameter. We have variations of spondee and pyrrhic in gray shadow and to his. And, of course, others, for example, trochee also can be found in other passages.

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The Question of Syntax



Can thy love,
Thy beauty, make amends, tho' even now,
Close over us, the silver star, thy guide, 25
Shines in those tremulous eyes that fill with tears
To hear me?

Let me go: take back thy gift:
Why should a man desire in any way
To vary from the kindly race of men
Or pass beyond the goal of ordinance 30
Where all should pause, as is most meet for all?



One thing we notice in this poem is it has many questions. So we have this title, The Question of Syntax. Let us read them again. They will show the agony of the speaker.

“Can thy love,
Thy beauty, make amends, tho' even now,
Close over us, the silver star, thy guide, 25
Shines in those tremulous eyes that fill with tears
To hear me?

Let me go: take back the gift:

That is immortality.

Why should a man desire in any way
To vary from the kindly race of men
Or pass beyond the goal of ordinance 30
Where all should pause, as is most meet for all?

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The Question of Syntax



Why wilt thou ever scare me with thy tears,
And make me tremble lest a saying learnt,
In days far-off, on that dark earth, be true? 48

Yet hold me not for ever in thine East:
How can my nature longer mix with thine? 65

More questions: restlessness and helplessness;
desperate attempt to seek release from a given condition



Here, we have two more questions.

“Why will thou ever scare me with thy tears,
And make me tremble lest a saying learnt,
In days far-off, on that dark earth, be true? 48

Yet hold me not for ever in thine East:
How can my nature longer mix with thine? 65

These questions, more number of questions in your poem can refer to this restlessness and helplessness of the speaker.

Even the helplessness of the divine being that is Aurora. Aurora cannot take back that blessing now from Zeus, once given is given. So that is why when she is unable to bear this any longer, this suffering any longer, she turns Tithonus into cicada. Tithonus is full of desperation. He attempts to seek release from this given condition.

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Formal and Thematic Aspects

- **Form:** Dramatic Monologue; a speaker, a listener, an occasion
- **Emotional Tone:** Elegiac; a sense of loss and regret
- **Mode:** Lyrical and reflective
- **Atmosphere:** Erotic and dramatic
- **Philosophical:** "The aim of life is death" (Freud)
- **Language:** repetitive; indicative of boredom
- **Theme:** The Drama of Desire for Death
- **Message:** Crossing boundaries is undesirable.
- **Mood:** Skeptical and interrogative
- **Syntactical Tone:** Rising tone
- **Allusion:** Apollo singing a song



We can pay attention to certain formal and thematic aspects in this poem. The form of the poem is dramatic monologue. We have a speaker, a listener, and an occasion. The emotional tone is elegiac, melancholic, there is a sense of loss, loss of manhood. That is a whole thing. Loss of life, that is loss of death is a problem. Death, he cannot meet because of this immortality and regret. The mode is lyrical and reflective.

The atmosphere is somewhat erotic and dramatic because this whole idea of this man and woman coming together is because of desire, Aurora's physical desire for Tithonus. We also have the philosophical reflection on what is the aim of life. That is, the aim of life according to Freud is death. That is exemplified in this poem. Language is repetitive and interrogative, indicative of boredom and questioning, skeptical, mind of this speaker.

The theme is 'the drama of desire for death.' The message is crossing boundaries is not desirable. Maybe those who have this ideological bias can read this poem, saying that Tennyson was with the establishment, he did not question the establishment. Mood is skeptical and interrogative. Syntactical tone is rising tone, it asks questions. There is an allusion to Apollo singing a song, rising this tower in Ilion.

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Overall Impression

- The speaker of the poem reflects on the circular process of nature in the form of growth and decay.
- But Tithonus, born as a human being and turned immortal without eternal youth by Aeos/ Aurora, is consumed by immortality.
- Tithonus grows old, suffers the pain of old age, and keeps questioning his fate endlessly.
- He repeats the same request for release to Aurora every day knowing he cannot be released into the earth.
- Even the goddess can only shed tears for Tithonus and her helplessness.
- The poem enacts the drama of human desperation in the face of cruel immortality and the irony of our desire.



On the whole, we can say the speaker of the poem reflects on the circular process of nature in the form of growth and decay, but he is followed by death. And here, birth is stopped with immortality. That is why Tithonus is unable to die. But Tithonus, born as a human being and turned immortal without eternal youth that is a crux of it. Without eternal youth, by Aurora is consumed by immortality. Tithonus grows old, suffers the pain of old age, and keeps questioning his fate endlessly.

He repeats the same request for release to Aurora every day, knowing he cannot be released into the earth. Even the goddess can only shed tears for Tithonus, show her helplessness. The poem enacts a drama of human desperation in the face of cruel immortality and irony of our desire. When our desire is fulfilled, that itself becomes a curse in the case of Tithonus.

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A Revisionary Reading (Thomas (2017)

- "Tithonus" (1860), a revision of "Tintern Abbey" (1798)
- Both poems explore the self in time, discuss memory and nature, and present a speaker and a listener but both suppress the female voice.
- **Wordsworth**: nature never betrays the loving heart.
- **Tennyson**: Nature does betray the heart's desire (for immortality which consumes Tithonus miserably).
- **Wordsworth**: Dorothy is benign and nursing nature.
- **Tennyson**: Aurora is malign and scary nature.
- **Wordsworth** recovers his lost imagination.
- **Tennyson** drowns in darkness in stark contrast to the old man in "Resolution and Independence."
- "Tithonus" is a Victorian poem with a "changing project."



A critic called Thomas, offers a revisionary reading of this poem, comparing this with Tintern Abbey. Both poems, explore the self in time, discuss memory and nature, and present a speaker and listener, but both suppress the female voice. In the case of Wordsworth, nature never betrays the loving heart. But in Tennyson, nature does betray the heart's desire for immortality, which consumes Tithonus miserably.

In Wordsworth, his sister Dorothy is benign and nursing nature. But in Tennyson, Aurora is a malign and scary nature. Wordsworth recovers his lost imagination in the poem Tintern Abbey, but Tennyson drowns in darkness in stark contrast to the old man in another poem by Wordsworth, Resolution, and Independence. Therefore, Thomas says Tithonus is a Victorian poem with a changing project.

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An Intertextual Reading (Weinfield)



- Weinfield offers an intertextual reading of Tennyson's 'Ulysses,' "Tithon," and "Tithonus," Keats's "The Fall of Hyperion," Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and "Tintern Abbey," and King James version of *Ecclesiastes* from *The Bible*.
- He compares the complementary character of Ulysses, the dreamer of Keats's **Titaness**, the lament of Adam, the burden of Wordsworth, and the Biblical acceptance of human vanity with Tennyson's **Tithonus** to vindicate the victory of the poetic faith over scientific doubt.
- Thus, he argues that Tithonus's feeling of hope is genuine.



Another critic, Weinfield offers an intertextual reading. This may be a somewhat dense reading, but it is worth knowing about because by reading one poem, we come to know the overall context of English poetry here. Weinfield offers an intertextual reading of Tennyson's Ulysses, Tithon, that is a previous draft of Tithonus; Then Tithonus. Keat's poem, The Fall of Hyperion, Milton's Paradise Lost, Wordsworth's, The Prelude, and Tintern Abbey. And also King James version of Ecclesiastes from the Bible.

Weinfeld compares the complementary character of Ulysses, the dreamer of Keat's Titaness, the lament of Adam, the burden of Wordsworth, and the biblical acceptance of human vanity with the Tennyson's Tithonus to indicate the victory of the poetic fade over scientific doubt. This problem of faith and doubt is resolved in this manner, according to Weinfield. Thus, the critic argues that, Tithonus' feeling of hope is genuine. Some critics may not agree with this, but this is a reading given by Weinfield.

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Summary



- Historical and Literary Context
- Lord Tennyson
- Tithonus Myth
- "Tithonus"
- Analysis
- A Revisionary Reading
- An Intertextual Reading



In summary, we have looked at the historical and literary context in which Lord Tennyson wrote his poems, especially Tithonus, using Tithonus Myth, giving expression to the helplessness of human beings, the skeptical mind of human beings. We offered a linguistic, rhetorical analysis of the poem and then a revisionary reading followed by an intertextual reading. We believe these readings will be of some use to understand Tennyson's poem in a much better way.

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References



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- Ward, Arthur D. 1974. "'Ulysses' and 'Tithonus': Tunnel Vision and Idle Tears," *Victorian Poetry*, 12 (4): 311-319.
- Weinfield, Henry. 2009. "'Of Happy Men That Have the Power to Die': Tennyson's 'Tithonus,'" *Victorian Poetry*, 47 (2): 355-378.



The three references are here. Those who want to know more about this dense reading of Weinfield can refer to this article, 'Of Happy Men That Have the Power to Die: Tennyson's

Tithonus' published in Victorian poetry. This is a very interesting article, which gives us knowledge about literature and poetry in much wider context. Thank you.