On Themes of the Eagle by Alfred Tennyson

Abstract: Theme is significant to poetry. Not only music but also theme is related to poetry since its birth. Usually great poems have more than one theme. Nowadays different approaches of literary analysis are on stage. The different approaches are employed to expound the rich themes of The Eagle—in memorial of Hallam, in praise of Britain’s colonial expansion and in eulogy of nature.

Keywords: Tennyson; The Eagle; themes

1 Introduction

Alfred Tennyson (1809–1892) embraces great repute as a musician of letters. It is well known that Tennyson’s poems are imbued with musical and formal beauty to the extent that people claim recitation of Tennyson’s poems will naturally bestow gifts of poetry on the readers. Poetry has been related with music since its birth. If deprived of music, poetry might then fall into the pool of prose. Although those scholars have mentioned the importance of theme in poetry when talking about music and form, I still feel that it is necessary to explore into theme, especially when related to Tennyson’s poems. I do not mean to underestimate nor criticize their emphasis on extrinsic qualities. In fact, those scholars’ efforts in relating music to significance or their exploration into how form foregrounds theme of poems should be accepted with great enthusiasm. As to the theme of the poem The Eagle, I will discuss later. Though biographical criticism is highly criticized at present, I insist upon talking about Tennyson’s life and style for the reason that one’s life experience plays an important part in literature creation.

2 Tennyson’s life and style

Alfred Tennyson, the most important poet of the Victorian Age, was born in 1809, the fourth son of a clergyman in Somersby, a village in Lincolnshire. As a child, he began to write poems, and took the laurel in 1850 after Wordsworth died. From this time until his death, forty-two years later, in 1892, he stood as the spokesman of his people in times of national sorrow or rejoicing. In such poems as The Charge of the Light Brigade, The Revenge, and The Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington, he ministered to national pride, stoked the fires of imperialism, and brought poetry nearer to the national life than it had been since Shakespeare. Among Tennyson’s friends, Arthur Henry Hallam is never to be forgotten, for the reason that he has great influence on our poet and permeates nearly all his literary life. In 1817 did they get acquainted with each other and they both studied at Cambridge. They were brought together not only by friendship but also by relation. Arthur Henry Hallam was said to be engaged to Tennyson’s younger sister. Unfortunately, Hallam died in 1833 at an early age of twenty–two, which left Tennyson lamenting his early death all his life.

Tennyson has the repute of “artist of the poets”. It is not hard for the readers to infer that he is famous for music in poems. His poems are distinctive of ornate diction, perfect harmony, rational rhyming, lively rhythm and strong artistic appeal. In fact, Tennyson can be rendered as a conventional poet for he seldom breaches the rules of the English language.

3 Current research about theme in poetry

The readers usually feel that a story is about something or a story is meant to say something universal. In literature, it is called theme. The theme is a central or dominating idea in a piece of work of art regardless of art, music or literature. In poetry, fiction, and drama it refers to the abstract concept made concrete through its representation in person, action and image in the work. Proper theme is simply a subject or an activity. Deng Xuxin (2002: 133) distinguishes “between theme and plot: what happens is the plot, what the happenings add up to is the theme. The theme of a story is whatever general idea or insight the entire story reveals.” Later on page one–hundred–and–thirty–five he claims, “Great short stories frequently have more than one theme.” As a matter of fact, I think this statement also holds true to poems. I think poems have more than one theme. The poets might want to convey something when creating his or her own poems, however, we the readers could interpret their poems from our own viewpoints especially when individuality is highly spoken of. Somebody has claimed that one thousand readers see one thousand Hamlets. I think one thousand readers have more than one thousand Hamlets for in different periods they have different opinions and time is so powerful to change people’s viewpoints. Additionally, the fiction writers, poets, and the playwrights encourage us to participate in the process of interpretation actively rather than guessing the poet’s original idea. The modernist approach should be multifarious. If different readers interpret one poem in the same way, although we cannot say the poet is unsuccessful we are at least allowed to claim that the poet is never creative or he/she is somewhat skin-deep in thought. It is for this reason that the identification of themes of poems becomes much more difficult than the readers imagine. When we attempt to identify the theme we are attempting to formulate in our own words the statement about life or human experience that is made by the total work. In additional, it necessarily involves us in the analysis of a number of elements, say, rhythm, sound, rhyming, images, symbols, in their relation to one another and to the poem as a whole.

The task will be completed successfully if we are willing to be open minded and objective and resist the temptation to put emphasis on only some rather than all the elements of the work. The process of identifying the theme will help us in making the work finally and fully our own.

4 Theme–identification of the poem The Eagle

Music is, as is known to all, indispensable to any poem. We all know that images are of great importance in poem writing, without which the poems written will sound unnatural or we can say they lose poetical beauty. Concerning theme, as I have mentioned in the last part, it is extremely important for
any poem must have at least one theme (here theme is closely related to significance). If deprived of theme, any kind of literature becomes unnatural and insignificant. To make comments on poems is analogous to appraisal of any piece of work of art. First of all, we should question the purpose of the poem. While reading The Eagle, especially when I try to identify the theme, I feel hesitant to believe what those scholars talk about. Nearly all of them hold the same opinion that this poem is meant to lament Hallam’s death. They believe that the eagle reminds our poet Tennyson of his lifelong friend, which inspires him to make such an analogy between the brave eagle and Hallam. I do not want to comment on other scholar’s viewpoints nor speak lowly of their efforts. In fact, I to some extent agree with them, for Hallam is really important to Tennyson and Tennyson has written a lot of things to lament his untimely death. I just feel we need to voice our own opinions and I also hope that more and more people will take pains in interpreting this poem.

4.1 In memorial of his lifelong friend Hallam

For this part, I think it is necessary for me to say something about historical–biographical perspective of literary analysis. Historical–biographical perspective, one of the main means in the domain of traditional approach, sees a literary work chiefly, if not exclusively, as a reflection of its author’s life and times or the life and times of the characters portrayed in the literary work. We all know that historical novels, ideological or propagandist novels are susceptible to historical–biographical analysis. In the meantime, some people think that poems are not to be analyzed nor interpreted from the historical–biographical perspective. However, poems with social themes, even some lyric poems are susceptible to historical–biographical analysis. Although I do not feel satisfied with the tendency of extending the traditional approach to any poem, although I express my disappointment of scholars’ agreement on theme of The Eagle, I still need to expound on this interpretation, for Tennyson’s poems are largely influenced by his own life and his lifelong friend Hallam. As a matter of fact, any poet regardless of greatness is susceptible to his own life experience. As regards Tennyson, Hallam is to Tennyson as is water to fish. Hallam’s untimely death is really disappointing, depressing and deteriorating. There is no difference between the loss of a lifelong friend and the death of one’s soul. Without soul, how can man live? Furthermore, Hallam is Tennyson’s loyal reader and he usually gives instructive and constructive suggestions to help him improve. It seems to a poet that his efforts become useless when he lose his loyal reader and then he naturally feels sad and disappointed, which lessens his creating enthusiasm and in those ten years he writes nothing.

In fact, it is very easy for us to find evidence in The Eagle. The first stanza obviously presents a brave, lively, gifted eagle which reminds us of excellent Hallam, who seems to still live in this world. It is not difficult for us to imagine Hallam’s brevity, insight, strength and perseverance. Turning to the second stanza, I feel convinced of Hallam’s adventurous character and Tennyson’s great sorrow. It seems that Hallam believes no danger and insists in pursuit of truth. As to Tennyson, Hallam’s untimely death is similar to a thunderbolt. He makes no preparations for his disappearance just as the readers are not ready for the last line of the poem “like a thunderbolt he falls.” The personification of the eagle as a man makes us think of Hallam easily. While reading the first stanza we seem to see a man pursuing truth regardless of danger, solitude, misunderstanding and strong will. No matter what happens in the world, he just does what is required by truth and stick to his own beliefs. The phrase “he stands” reminds me of the image of a brave, calm, composed man while “He clasps the crag with the crooked hands” inspires me that he persists in seeking truth and meets various difficulties head-on. His great courage enables him to wipe out all kinds of obstacles in front of him. In addition, “close to the sun and “Ringed with the azure world” suggest that his courage and composure finally bring what he wants to him—truth.

In the second stanza, “the wrinkled sea” is another example of personification. The word “wrinkled” could easily remind us of old age. Generally speaking, old age means declining strength, kindness, fatherly care, solemnity, enigma and hidden danger. Hallam pays no attention to the hidden danger because of his strong will of seeking truth so that he loses his life at last. Sharp contrast made by the poet foregrounds Hallam’s untimely death and the great cost of seeking truth. Syntactically, the third and the sixth lines deviate from normal sentential order. As to the poet’s purpose of such deviation, I myself hold that the third line is deviated to meet the requirements of rhyming, and the sixth line, however, is deviated not only to conform to rhyming but also to foreground the significance of the poem, which through the simile “like a thunderbolt” conveys that Hallam dies untimely and the poet has great sorrow.

4.2 In praise of Britain’s colonial expansion

For Marxist critics, the interrelations of economic basis to superstructure and the discussions of ideology remain useful and beneficial although it is criticized as vulgar Marxist economic determinism. The only task of art is to mirror social life vividly through language. Clydo Caldwell (Zhang Zhongzai, 2002: 367) remarks, “poetry should be understood as economic in essence.” In addition, George Lukacs denounces, for instance, as reductionistic and mechanistic the vulgar Marxist version of criticism whereby the features of a cultural text were strictly determined by or interpreted in terms of the economic and social conditions of its production and by the class status of its author (Zhu Gang, 2001:59). George Lukacs believes that not only the contemporary leading ideology but also its criticism are reflected in great literary works. Karl Marx (R. Selden; P. Widdowson, 2004: 88) says, “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness,” which provides evidence that one’s social conditions and economic existence to a great extent determine his/her spiritual world. Besides, George Lukacs is closely associated with the reflection theory. He and his followers stress literature’s reflection, conscious or unconscious, of the social reality surrounding it—not just a reflection of a flood of realistic detail but a reflection of the essence of a society.

With such a good command of the Marxist approach, I believe it is time for us to talk about The Eagle. Since literature reflects the essence of a society, The Eagle is, in my opinion, no exception, so we are compelled to answer the question, “what is the essence of the society in which The Eagle appears?” It is said that the poem is written in 1851 when Britain transforms into an industrial country from a feudal society. In such a country, two conflicting classes emerge—the capitalist class and the proletariat. After the Industrial Revolution, Britain developed quickly in economic power. Britain’s economic prosperity makes good preparations for colonial expansion. When he swallows India, Britain stretches his tentacles
towards China. Any Chinese would never forget the Opium Wars and those unequal treaties. In 1851, Britain has already finished the Industrial Revolution and then he devotes himself to colonial expansion and gradually becomes a full-fledged colonial empire. Besides, Tennyson is given the title Poet Laureate in 1850 after William Wordsworth died. As is known to all, he has great ambition and takes great pains to carry on his work. After twenty years’ hard work he finally gets crowned with success, and he to some extent amounts to the pinnacle of his career. Generally speaking, successful men are complacent with their status quo and get fully aware of their own social effects and individual value. Although Tennyson does not say anything about the theme of this poem, we can still reason his eulogizing the British Empire. I think nobody will deny Tennyson’s repute as a patriot. Despite that Tennyson accepts the title of Poet Laureate, he remains a great poet not only in excellent form and music but also in content. However, this poem sounds somewhat vulgar for it sings praise of the British Empire. His pride and patriotism permeate every line of the poem. Here the poet chooses “He” rather than “she” to talk about his country with the implication that Britain is strong rather than weak. The phrase “Crooked hands” reminds us of his piecing tentacles while “the crag” symbolizes the colonies and dominions he has plundered in several decades. “Close to the sun” implies that our poet thinks his country is very great in colonial expansion while the sun is used to symbolize the summit of colonial expansion. The word “lonely” reminds us of his pride. It seems that his country is right and great in enslaving so many countries and his country is the only legal one to colonize other nations. “The azure world” makes me associate those colonies and dominions he has seized. He seems to remind us that colonial expansion transforms brutal nations (in their own eyes) to civilized slaves. This stanza presents us a complacent thief talking about what a great thing he has done through stealing other people’s belongings. “The wrinkled sea beneath him” here refers to the poor people or the colonies and dominions under the exploitation and suppression of Britain. I think “crawls” is a proper word to describe their conditions. In fact, they are crawling under Britain’s strong feet. “He watches from his mountain walls” reminds us that although he has swallowed a large number of nations he is not at all satisfied. This line portrays a greedy middle-aged man who covets other countries’ territory. Once an opportune moment appears, he will not let it slip. It is his great ambition and unimaginable greed that enables him to seize every chance just as the last line reads “like a thunderbolt he falls.” Britain is so strong, greedy, violent and aggressive that those unfortunate nations fall victim to his tentacles.

4. In eulogy of nature

Tennyson’s times is distinctive of industry and machines. Industrial Revolution not only brings economic prosperity but also pollution of nature. William Wordsworth has done a great amount of work in retrieving to nature. Tennyson does talk about nature in his other poems. Reading this poem I feel that the writer is still singing songs of nature and calling on people to resort to nature. The whole poem presents us a brave, lively, consistent, strong-willed eagle although his living circumstances are not as beneficial as usual. Industry has deprived the eagle of his living conditions. In these six lines we cannot find anything green. We know that green is the color of life and green symbolizes hope and future. The tonal color of this poem is azure or blue, which symbolizes bleakness and the end of life. In fact we get more and more worried about the future of the eagle and also the future of human beings and we are afraid that blue will one day disappear and only black is left behind. Nevertheless, the eagle will never give up. “He clasps the crag with crooked hands” reminds us of a dying man. The only difference is that he is optimistic and perseverant for he wants to resist to the unequal fate until the last minute although time is limited. The word “lonely” conveys the theme obviously in that natural pollution strips the eagle of his family so that the eagle becomes lonely. Here “close to the sun” symbolizes the eagle at the edge of death for the sun referring to danger or the end of life is too hot for plants, animals and human beings to approach. In this azure world, only the sea and the sky are left and our eagle can never fly. That brave eagle can just stand there to keep alive and oppose to human beings.

The violent sea declines in strength because nothing could make her outrage and she loses her temper. Otherwise we can reason that at the edge of death, in the eagle’s eyes the sea becomes less violent for he cannot see clearly. At last he cannot resist the calling of God and falls from the crag and dies. Who is to blame for the eagle’s death? I think it is the industrial society and human beings’ greed. They have swallowed the eagle’s living space and his family. Until here I think I should call on people to leave some room for the plants and animals. Nowadays, harmony is eulogized. I hope we can also create harmony between the nature and the human beings. Since Tennyson has realized the importance of nature one hundred and fifty years ago, we should set more emphasis on nature.

5 Conclusion

After such an exploration of the themes of The Eagle, I think you will never doubt my statement that one thousand readers have more than one thousand Hamlets. I have talked about the theme of this poem, however, because of my inability I can not least all possible interpretations here. I believe nobody could list all of its themes for we readers have different opinions, so I hope you would like to read this poem and give your own interpretation. In addition, I hope we can learn from Tennyson his cherish of friendship, his patriotism (although colonial expansion is in itself wrong and illegal) and also his love of nature. If it is possible we had better try our best to protect nature—mother of plants, animals and also human beings.

References: