

Activity versus Disengagement in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "Ulysses" and "Tithonus" A Gerontological View

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ABSTRACT

In past decades, gerontologists made considerable progress in the study of old age and aging via clinical research. Their work illuminates the experience of growing old, including lifestyle issues in declining years, cognitive development and wisdom, relationships between generations, and the elderly as mythical figures. Recently, scholars from diverse fields also noted this neglected segment of the population and made major contributions to the study of old age. Writers began to create mature protagonists and to focus on gerontological issues such as Alzheimer's, loss, loneliness, fear, and faith. Literary critics too provided reference texts to literature and aging and celebrated the literary imagination of aging authors. The present study addresses the experience of aging in two dramatic monologues by Victorian poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892), "Ulysses" (1842) and "Tithonus" (1860), which explore the issue of continued activity versus disengagement. In "Tithonus," the changes associated with growing old strongly influence the speaker; aging is a process of destruction, degradation, and deterioration. By contrast, in "Ulysses," the speaker shows little concern for his physical transformation, perceiving growing old as an opportunity for further development. Both speakers face the choices of activity or inertia; their eventual decisions reveal Tennyson's insight into the process of aging. This study differs from others in its emphasis on gerontology. Tennyson, although a nineteenth-century poet, explores elderliness in the manner of a professional; his treatment transcends disciplinary divisions between literature and gerontology and deserves recognition.

KeyWords: Aging, Gerontology, Interdisciplinary, Old age, Poetry, Tennyson.

INTRODUCTION

"Old age," according to Albrecht Classen's (2007) *Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, is often perceived "as the age of retirement, books, churchgoing, and rambling talk," and therefore not a subject worthy of consideration by researchers (p.3). Although senior citizens are as integral to society as young people, modern societies still have little patience for the elderly, who are viewed as burdensome and branded accordingly. The last stage of life is nowadays seen less as a process of development and more as a state of terror. Whereas earlier societies thought highly of their elderly, modern societies, have segregated this growing segment of the population to the point of banishment. It is not surprising, then, that the aged seem to elicit little scholarly attention. Most researchers, in fact, have come to consider this group as a subculture "comparable to the subcultures of minority groups" and hence not really important (McKee, 1987, p. 48).

Linguist Anne Wyatt-Brown (1993) argues that "with the attention given to race, gender, and class, only age has remained invisible, not subject to analysis" (p.1). Professor of Classics Tim Parkin (1998)

supports this view, maintaining that "the subject of old age seems scarcely to warrant investigation" (Parkin, 1998, p. 20). Professor of history Peter Stearns (1976) echoes this lack of interest, remarking that "only one article by a professional historian exists on any aspect of the history of aging" (p. 13). This disregard for the aged has also been noted by psychologists, psychiatrists, and gerontologists. In *Why Survive? Being Old in America*, psychiatrist and gerontologist Robert N. Butler (1975) calls old age "the neglected stepchild of the human life cycle," arguing that humans do not wish to know their vulnerabilities, and thus refuse to think about growing old (p. 1). People in general and researchers in particular have upheld the belief that elderliness means decay, and any other explanation is dismissed as "romantic nonsense" (Wyatt-Brown, 1993, p. 2). Cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker in *The Denial of Death* (1975) expresses this best when he declares, "we suffer from a pervasive but almost completely repressed fear of decay and death" (p. 11). His assertion implies that old

age is rejected by other age groups primarily due to dread, and that they would go as far as banishing old age from the social arena if it were possible. This negative view is partially to blame for the exclusion of the elderly in modern cultures. Contemporary societies fail to provide for the aged the most natural social function of cultural passage: esteem. Hence, denial of this esteem leads to the conviction that the aged are no more than representations of the undesirable consequences of growing old: illness, weakness, degeneration, and ultimately death. Once viewed as such, society rejects the old and aging because they challenge the illusions of everlasting youth and immortality, making them scapegoats for society's anxieties concerning aging. Thus, rather than promote the image of the wise elder so valued in earlier and simpler cultures, modern societies instead cultivate the image of uselessness of old age (McKee, 1987, pp. 51-52).

It is for this reason that most novelists, poets, and playwrights have hesitated to make mature characters their central protagonists, fearing that works depicting the elderly would attract few readers. Gerontologist Paul Johnson (1998) observed this shortage, commenting: "Old age rarely seems to be regarded by a writer as interesting in itself: it is relevant above all as an influence on a young, new life, and never as the culmination of life" (p. 17). When an artist creates elderly characters, they often demonstrate a pattern of "mid-life defeat" (Wyatt-Brown, 1993, p. 9). One example is Henrik Ibsen, whose antiquated protagonists seldom appear content. Old age therefore seems a taboo subject, leading distinguished scholars such as Classen (2007) to enquire:

Has the modern disregard of, or perhaps even discomfort with, old people in western societies led to a form of myopia in research as well? Has the current tendency to move old people into retirement communities or retirement homes, hence to make them disappear from our modern and post-modern life with its dominant focus on youth, also influenced research? This might well be. (p. 3)

The prejudice toward the elderly has indeed affected scholarly research. The

challenges elderly people face in their efforts to make the best possible use of their final years as well as their standing position in society elicits little interest. Other than gerontological research about the elderly, not many studies exist on the topic. The absence of literary characters in their declining years sets real limits on postmodern literary practice. Moreover, it is unfair that the only records of senior citizens are mere listings of "household structure, pension payments, hospital admissions or burials" (Johnson, 1998, p. 17). Fortunately, several scholars have recently turned their attention to the last stages of life; nonetheless, it remains an undervalued subject that this study attempts to address from the perspective of poetry. The study will focus on two dramatic monologues by Victorian poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892), "Ulysses" (1842) and "Tithonus" (1860). These two works detail different ways in which people adjust to maturing. Through "Ulysses" and "Tithonus," Tennyson explores issues of lifestyle in advanced years—of continued activity versus disengagement.

In "Tithonus," the physical changes associated with growing old are a major influence on the speaker, in which aging is presented as a process of deterioration. On the other hand, in "Ulysses," the speaker shows little concern for his physical transformation. Instead, he perceives aging as an opportunity for further development. The employment of the dramatic monologue allows both speakers to reveal their respective thought processes without judgment or interference.

Few studies conducted on these poems pay attention to the role of the dramatic monologue in illuminating character. However, critics such as Cornelia Pearsall (2008) stress the importance of this poetic form. Pearsall praises the extraordinary power of Tennyson's monologues and finds both speakers very persuasive. Moreover, she denies that the sole purpose of dramatic monologues is to present speakers who expose themselves unconsciously or accidentally, "thus wholly subverting any discernible

discursive intentions” (p. 21). Both speakers face the choices of activity or inertia, and their eventual decisions reveal Tennyson’s remarkable insight into old age and aging. Where this study may differ from others is in its emphasis on gerontology. Tennyson, although a nineteenth-century poet, explores elderliness in the manner of a professional in the field. His treatment of the topic transcends disciplinary divisions between literature and gerontology and merits further examination.

Critical Reception

The majority of critics viewed both “Ulysses” and “Tithonus” in relation to Tennyson’s grief over Arthur Hallam’s death, the poet’s close friend who died on September 15, 1833. Tennyson biographer James D. Kissane (1970), for example, insists that the “autobiographical” element in both poems is “hard to deny” (p.135). David Shaw (1976), another Tennyson biographer, supports this understanding, believing that both poems are “a response to the brutal shock of Hallam’s death” (p.84). Andrew Lang (2008), likewise maintains, “Tennyson wrote ‘Ulysses’ and ‘Tithonus’ at a time when his ‘grief was fresh’ over losing his beloved friend” (p. 23). Others of a similar opinion include Robert Bernard Martin, James Kincaid, John Oates, Paul Turner, Linda Hughes, and Aaron Watson.

The present study reasons that too great an emphasis on the poems’ relation to Hallam’s death led to some distortions of their meaning. Nevertheless, if one were to interpret both poems autobiographically, then Tennyson’s father, who played a pivotal role in his son’s life, would be the likelier source. Dr. George Tennyson, the Rector of Somersby in Lincolnshire, combined powerful intellect with a glum temperament, whose massive library formed the foundation of his son’s early education (Turner, 1976, p. 18). As the elder Tennyson aged, his body and mind began to show signs of deterioration from epilepsy. He was reduced to such weakness from repeated attacks that “the slightest shock was sufficient to bring

them on again” (Ward, 1898, p. 33). Watson (2010) explains that “of all the children Alfred was probably the most affected by his father’s decline. Not only was he fond of the Rector, but he probably felt that everything happening to his father might be repeated in his own life” (p. 25). In February 1831, the Rector was diagnosed with typhus, and his son was called home. On 16 March, the elder Tennyson died. That night Tennyson slept in his father’s bed, “earnestly desiring to see his ghost, but no ghost came. ‘You see,’ he said, ‘ghosts do not come to imaginative people’” (Watson, 2010, p. 29).

Witnessing first-hand the consequences of old age unquestionably played a role in the composition of both “Ulysses” and “Tithonus,” even though the poet denied any association between his poetry and his personal life. Matthew Campbell (1999) in *Rhythm and Will in Victorian Poetry* writes, “Tennyson strenuously resisted attempts at reading his monologues as autobiography” (p. 130). When speaking of *In Memoriam*, the poet pointed out that “‘the author’ is not always the ‘I’ that speaks in the sections of the poem, that it is ‘a poem, *not* an actual biography,’ and that ‘I’ is ‘the voice of the human race speaking thro’ the author’” (Campbell, 1999, p. 130). It is believed nonetheless that Tennyson’s conscious intentions are not directly relevant to the critical analysis of his poems because the mind of the artist, according to literary critic Wilfred Guerin (2011), “is structured essentially like other human minds and is therefore influenced by a welter of unconscious forces” (p. 203). Still, Tennyson’s claim to universality concerning his poems should be considered. The poet uses poetry to express conventional attitudes rather than original, intensely personal feeling. “Tithonus” and “Ulysses” belong together, not in their bearing upon Tennyson’s life, but as an opposing pair of imaginary portraits. The two poems are mutually revealing as a formal exercise in the contrast of elemental human types, accentuating the voices of the old and aging.

Whether they relate to the elder Tennyson is not what concerns us here; rather, it is the poet's remarkable representations of agedness. Tennyson portrays two sides of aging: the positive and the negative, "helplessness and hopelessness of old age" (Parkin, 1998, p. 33).

GERONTOLOGY

In 1961, social scientists Elaine Cumming and William Earl Henry put forward a "disengagement" theory of aging that suggested, "aging is an inevitable, mutual withdrawal or disengagement, resulting in decreased interaction between the aging person and others in the social system" (p. 226). Although plausible, this was opposed by numerous gerontologists including Robert J. Havighurst (1961), who postulated that it was possible for the elderly to experience healthy aging by staying active and being socially involved (p. 9). Accordingly, the "activity" theory of aging was developed. Over time, gerontologists perceived both the "disengagement" and the "activity" theory as ideal prototypes of aging, and defined them as follows:

The disengagement approach occurs when an aging person gradually withdraws from the roles, activities, and purposes of adult midlife, and substitutes in their place a style of interiority and increased concern with reflective understanding of the self. This approach is sometimes called the "rocking chair" approach to old age, because it favors withdrawing from the active life-style of middle age and increasing the amount of time spent in reflective thought. In contrast, the activity orientation consists in continued commitment to the roles, activities, and purposes of midlife. (McKee, 1987, p. 24)

A representation of the activity orientation occurs in "Ulysses," while "Tithonus" suggests the disengagement position. Ulysses is portrayed as an active old man who still wants to explore despite his age. The poem provides an optimistic view of aging, showing that senior citizens could remain vigorous and fit, not only to govern but also to pursue adventurous journeys. On the other hand, Tithonus expresses his contempt for old age by illuminating its

setbacks. He raises many negative attributes associated with declining years: physical disabilities and illnesses, loss of pleasures and senses, impotence, exclusion from society, and suicidal thoughts.

"Ulysses"

An old man's strong determination to make the most of what little time he has left is the subject of Tennyson's "Ulysses," published in Tennyson's second volume of *Poems* in 1842. The main source is Homer's *Odyssey*, although critics such as John Pettigrew (1963) insist that Tennyson based his poem on the fallen hero of Dante's *Inferno*, "one of the chief sinners, a master of guile whose cunning and rhetorical skill have doomed so many others besides himself" (Pettigrew, 1963, p. 31). Pettigrew maintains that to perceive Tennyson's Ulysses as "a noble hero" is "a simple view" (p. 32). However, this study argues that to view Ulysses' determination and perseverance as sinful instead of admirable qualities is to undermine Tennyson's exceptional representation of the "activity" phase of old age. Critic Robert Spoo (2012) supports this opinion, introducing Ulysses as "Homer's legendary Greek king and warrior as reimagined by the nineteenth-century English poet Alfred Tennyson" (p. 81). Tennyson biographer Paul Turner (1976) also believes that Homer, rather than Dante, inspired the poem, stating:

Odysseus is told by Teiresias that, when he has dealt with the suitors, he must set off again with an oar; and that "a gentle death" will come to him "from the sea," when the people round him are prosperous, and he is "worn out with a comfortable old age." This paradoxical phrase apparently suggested Tennyson's picture of a man used to danger and excitement, who finds a comfortable, normal life extremely boring. (Turner, 1976, p. 31)

"Ulysses" begins with the king returning home to Ithaca after twenty years of absence only to discover that there is little need for him on the island, leading him to proclaim:

It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole
Unequal laws unto a savage race,
That hoard and sleep, and feed, and know not
me. (Tennyson, 2000a, p. 80)

Ulysses finds no joy in sitting inactive in a quiet, desolate place alongside an old wife, passing out orders to primitive people who know him only by name. As a result, he renounces a life of retirement and inactivity for a life of adventure. Though old, he is not weary, cynical, or troubled with regrets. Instead, he engages life as an ongoing and welcome challenge when he says, "I cannot rest from travel: I will drink / Life to the lees" (Tennyson, 2000a, p. 80).

The king's resolve to live life to the fullest led scores of critics to label him selfish. Pettigrew (1963), for example, senses an "element of selfishness in Ulysses' retreat from a world of responsibility," stating that the first six lines present the king as anything but noble, "for the bitterness is so intense as to make him odious" (Pettigrew, 1963, pp. 35-37). The literary critic further attacks Ulysses for using the word "aged" to describe his wife, protesting: "The undeniable snarl in 'Match'd with an aged wife' is scarcely fair to poor old Penelope, whose own marital loyalty has been displayed during the years of Ulysses' absence by her weaving a magic web as steadily as the Lady of Shalott (with the additional hardship of having to take the work out every night)" (Pettigrew, 1963, p. 37). This study argues against such unfair judgement of the king, since far from being egocentric, Ulysses is simply being truthful. The king has been away for twenty years, so it is inevitable that the younger generation know him only by name. Moreover, his wife is "aged," but so is he. For this reason, he uses the word "match'd," since it shows that he aligns himself with Penelope. Further proof of this assertion appears elsewhere in the poem when Ulysses aligns himself with the mariners and declares, "You and I are old" (Tennyson, 2000a, p. 81).

Viewed from a gerontological angle "aged wife," could convey another meaning; one associated with desirability in old age. Gerontologists believe that advanced age does not result in loss of passion. Nevertheless, "There may be a decline in [physical] activity and interest as individuals grow older"

(McKee, 1987, p. 27). With this in mind, it is possible that Ulysses perceives old age as a blessing since it liberates one from carnal desires and leaves the mind free to explore. For this reason, Penelope is stripped of all physicality. Unlike the Sirens who posed a threat to Ulysses' well-being with their alluring song/sexuality, Penelope is portrayed as non-sexual and, therefore, non-threatening. Consequently, manhood for the aged king who is "Match'd with an aged wife," is in action and adventure, rather than in physical indulgence (Tennyson, 2000a, p. 80).

Besides the two types of aging, gerontologists further identified three forms of cognitive growth in old age: "life review, integrative understanding, and universal perspective" (McKee, 1987, p. 33). The first was coined by Robert Butler in his article "Life Review: An Interpretation of Reminiscence in the Elderly" (1963), and defined as:

A naturally occurring, universal mental process characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of past experiences, and particularly, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts; simultaneously, and normally, these revived experiences and conflicts can be surveyed and reintegrated . . . prompted by the realization of approaching dissolution and death, and the inability to maintain one's sense of personal invulnerability. (Butler, 1963, p. 66)

Life review is thus a universal development in elderly persons, "a looking back process in which the content of one's life slowly unfolds and which is reflected in the familiar tendency of elderly people to reminisce about their past lives" (Butler, 1963, p. 65). This stage is critical, for it is only in the review of life that the elderly person can get a perspective on both past and future (Butler, 1963, p. 66).

In "Ulysses," the king remembers his days as a brave warrior, and prides himself in the experience acquired over the years:

Much have I seen and known; cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments,
Myself not least, but honor'd of them all;
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.
(Tennyson, 2000a, p. 80)

Ulysses travelled to various cities, came across different types of people, observed different cultures, and acquainted himself with diverse political regimes. He also gained plenty of experience battling the Trojans. This process of remembering affords him an opportunity to reflect on his past, and as a result decides that "it is dull to pause, to make an end, / To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use," since, "Old age hath yet his honour and his toil" (Tennyson, 2000a, pp. 80-81). With such a colourful past, the monologist decides that it is futile to stop, as there is still work to be done even in old age. Hence, it is only through the process of "life review" that Ulysses can move forward.

Ulysses feels a genuine zeal for the wandering life. After a lifetime of battle and adventure, his "grey spirit" still yearns for more quests, so he abandons "the sceptre and the isle" (Tennyson, 2000a, p. 80). Telemachus, his son, will rule instead:

This is my son, mine own Telemachus,
To whom I leave the sceptre and the isle —
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil
This labour, by slow prudence to make mild
A rugged people, and through soft degrees
Subdue them to the useful and the good.
Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to fail
In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet adoration to my household gods,
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.
(Tennyson, 2000a, p. 80)

The speaker introduces his son with tender compassion, expressing his pleasure in being a father and declaring his love for the young man. He then assures his listeners that Telemachus will soften "a rugged people," and through patience and perseverance transform them into useful do-gooders. Like any father, Ulysses praises his son. He says Telemachus is sharp, wise, astute, and well-suited to govern Ithaca. He will rule the island successfully and continue to honour the gods.

Ulysses' handing over of political responsibilities to his son led to much critical controversy. Whereas some perceived the act as wise and genuine, others criticised the action as selfish and un-kinglike. Kissane (1970), for example, dwells on the contrast between

father and son "which at least pointedly reverses the conventional relationship. It is the father whom we see restless and eager to leave the nest, whereas the son typifies 'slow prudence' and dedication to 'common duties'" (Kissane, 1970, p. 133). Pettigrew (1963) calls the action "inappropriate," adding, "the unpleasant aspects of Ulysses' character dominate" in the paragraph about his son (p. 40). Similarly, Pearsall (2008) feels that the deed is staged and forced, proclaiming "The praise is so unconvincing that many readers quite reasonably suspect the presence of irony, and certainly the great warrior's description of his civilized son can sound ambivalent" (p. 113). A Dwight Culler (1977), however, views the introduction of Telemachus as genuine, proceeding with, "Ulysses could hardly be more affectionate or approving" (p. 14). Wilfred P. Mustard (1970) agrees, stating "Common duties' means duties to the community; 'decent' means behaving properly. . . and 'blameless,' far from implying contempt, is a regular Homeric epithet for heroes, here recalling Nestor's phrase: 'my dear son, mighty and blameless' (*amumon*) in the *Odyssey*" (p. 88).

An interesting interpretation of the paragraph occurs in Matthew Rowlinson's essay "The Ideological Moment of Tennyson's 'Ulysses'" (1992), where the literary critic, rather than viewing Ulysses as the archetypal hero longing for further escapades, reads the poem in terms of colonialism. In Rowlinson's opinion, Ulysses is like a coloniser attempting to subdue the savages:

When he [Ulysses] complains of having to administer the law to a savage race, and installs Telemachus in his place "to make mild / A rugged people, and through soft degrees / Subdue them to the useful and the good," he seems to be imagining between himself and his subjects not just differences of class, but, bizarrely, cultural and even racial differences. He sounds, in fact, like a colonial administrator turning over the reins to a successor just before stepping on the boat to go home. (Rowlinson, 1992, p. 267)

Rowlinson's analysis is noteworthy here because it confirms that "Ulysses" allows for multiple interpretations. Still, despite

the various readings of the poem, this study claims that Ulysses' passing of governmental responsibilities onto his son is in accord with contemporary gerontological theories about agedness. The necessary link between generations is emphasised by gerontologists who believe in the role of the elderly in passing on cultural forms to succeeding generations (McKee, 1987, p. 43). Ulysses is portrayed as an official who bestows status and legitimacy to the young. It is a conventional generational picture, stressing the theme of generational passage through acts of continuity. The action proves in line with the third form of cognitive growth in old age, "universal perspective." Psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg (1973) states, "our ability to forego self-interested judgment for a more universalized, empathetic form of judgment tends to grow stronger in old age" (p. 630). Hence, Ulysses with superior moral insight realises that Telemachus is more suited than he to govern Ithaca. His ability to sacrifice self-interest and maintain a standpoint of universal humanity proves that he has achieved "universal moral perspective."

In "Ulysses," the familial bond appears very strong. There is harmony between all three family members. This synchronisation demonstrates the second form of cognitive growth in old age, "integrative understanding." Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson (1975) defines this as the ability to rise above the tensions between opposites like youth and age, love and hate, male and female, life and death (p. 92). This ability to experience the underlying unity of conflicting opposites seems central to "Ulysses." The entire poem, through the familial bond, expresses the underlying interest between the generations.

After passing on official duties to Telemachus, the monologist then turns to his old mariners:

Souls that have tol'd and wrought, and thought
with me-
That ever with a frolic welcome took
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
Free hearts, free foreheads—you and I are old;
Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;

Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.
(Tennyson, 2000a, p. 81)

Ulysses praises his loyal companions for their diligence throughout the years, then instructs them to prepare to depart. They and he are old, but not useless. Although death is near, they can still make a difference through some exemplary work. It is never too late "to seek a newer world" (Tennyson, 2000a, p. 81). Though Ulysses and his men have been weakened by time, and the aged king seems to foresee dangers ahead: "It may be that the gulfs will wash us down: / It may be that we shall touch the Happy Isles, / And see the great Achilles, whom we knew," still, he seems unfazed (Tennyson, 2000a, p. 81). Ulysses firmly believes that there is yet spirit in his old body "To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths / Of all the western stars, until [he] die[s]" (Tennyson, 2000a, p. 81). The old king does not counsel himself to reduce his ambitions, to accept the terms of his old age. He does not accept idleness because he is "strong in will / To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield" (Tennyson, 2000a, p. 81).

Critics questioned the existence of the mariners in the poem, given that in the *Odyssey* none survive in the end, and "Dante never places Ulisse [or his mariners] on Ithaca" (Ward, 1974, p. 315). However, the inclusion of the mariners in the poem may be an addition meant to evoke a sense of camaraderie between the old king and his friends. Ulysses' desire to spend the rest of his life with his friends rather than his family is in line with gerontological thought concerning segregation of the elderly. McKee explains:

It is often assumed that the elderly prefer age-integrated living arrangements, and that they favor the return to the extended family in which many generations live in the same house. These ideas are disproved by gerontological research. The aged prefer to live near but not with their grown children and their families. Most retired persons seem to prefer living in communities with people their own age—such as retirement communities—rather than in mixed neighborhoods. (1987, p 126)

This point undoubtedly applies to Ulysses,

who, although integrated into his society and appreciated by his family, prefers the company of his old mariners, "Souls that have tol'd and wrought, and thought with [him]" (Tennyson, 2000a, p. 81).

In addition to the experiences of life review, integrative understanding, and universal moral perspective, gerontologists believe that "late life also brings significant changes in the subjective experience of time. One of these changes is the experience of the passage of time as speeding up" (Butler, 1975, p. 81). This change occurs because, as one ages, one realizes that not much time is left, and for that reason, greater value is placed on the time remaining. Interestingly, this point also applies to Ulysses, who proves fully aware of the passage of time. Ulysses is obsessed with time to the point of fixation. He says, "I cannot rest from travel: I will drink / Life to the lees," later adding:

Little remains: But every hour is saved
From that eternal silence, something more,
A bringer of new things; and vile it were
For some three suns to store and hoard myself.
(Tennyson, 2000a, p. 81)

For the monologist, every hour counts. Consequently, it would be despicable to waste it. This emphasis on time reemerges when he admits to being old, but soon reassures his listeners that "Some work of noble note, may yet be done," proceeding with:

The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:

The long day wanes: the slow moon
climbs: the deep
Moans round with many voices. Come,
my friends, 'Tis not too late to seek a
newer world. (Tennyson, 2000a, p. 81)

The speaker's above description of nature corresponds to the aging process where the light of life slowly begins to diminish; the days shorten, and death draws near. Although the day fades and the moon rises, there is yet time for further exploration, but time is short. Therefore, they must act quickly:

We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved heaven and earth; that which we are,
we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.
(Tennyson, 2000a, p. 81)

There is so much life in the old king that he wants to make use of every second. Ulysses projects a desirable form of narcissism in old age, which German philosopher and critic Herbert Marcuse (1966) regards as "an essential condition for a creative and autonomous engagement with self, others and the outside world" (p. 258). The dimensions of positive narcissism in old age towards integration and individuation are achieved in "Ulysses." The speaker shows a strong, positive self-image that most would envy.

"Tithonus"

If "Ulysses" provides the ideal picture of aging, "Tithonus" presents the image of the extreme negative aspects of old age. The speaker is emaciated, skeletal, and barely human. The poem embodies what gerontologists term "the disengagement position," as opposed to "the activity orientation" (McKee, 1987, p. 24). It reveals the downside of aging when the body decays and the aged person prays for the end.

The poem, written in 1833 and called "Tithon," was conceived as a companion piece to "Ulysses." In 1859, it was revised, renamed, and published. Rowlinson (1994) explains that Tennyson "explicitly associated the two poems, describing 'Tithonus' in a letter as 'a pendant to Ulysses' in my former volumes." The literary critic notes "similarities and symmetries of theme between the two poems" (Rowlinson, 1994, p. 145). Although "Tithonus" complements "Ulysses," still it did not receive as much critical attention as the latter. Literary critic Arthur Ward (1974) confirms this point, stating "'Ulysses' has been subjected to far more critical light and heat than 'Tithonus'" (p. 312). Shaw (1976) provides some insight into the poem's neglect when he states that "though 'Tithonus' is acknowledged to be one of Tennyson's masterpieces—a poem of singular power and beauty, its resistance to scholarship and criticism comes in part

from a failure to place the work in its proper tradition and to relate it to comparable poems by Tennyson” (Shaw, 1976, p. 74). Those few critics who did choose to explore the poem, however, centred their attention primarily on its relation to Hallam’s death. Shaw (1976), for example, is adamant that the poem is “an elegy” (p. 85). Others, namely Arthur Simpson (1972), considered the poem a reflection of the alienated artist. “It shows a rejection of the life of private aestheticism,” proclaims Simpson (p. 906). Kincaid (1975), however, notes a comical side to the poem, calling it “a companion or even a contrast to the heroic poem [‘Ulysses’]; it is a bleak parody to its impulses . . . a total comic parody” (p. 49). Pearsall (2008), unlike Simpson and Kincaid, interpreted the poem in light of “masculine beauty, closely and elaborately identified with representations of femininity and effeminacy” (p. 215). Of all the criticisms available on “Tithonus,” Robert Langbaum’s (1963) declaration that Tennyson appears “strangely sensitive in [his] younger years to the debility feelings of old age . . . [evident in] the slowly withering Tithonus,” seems the most feasible (p. 92). Nonetheless, rather than elaborate, Langbaum quickly moves on to discuss other poems by Tennyson.

“Tithonus” is unarguably a poem about old age, offering a grim portrait of the loneliness and isolation of the elderly. Its melancholic tone conveys resignation and detachment from the living world. It portrays agedness unflinchingly as a time of anxiety and uncertainty. From the start, the speaker is shown in relative disengagement, with negative overtones. Unlike Ulysses, who embraces his old age, Tithonus shows complete detachment. He “withdraws from the roles, activities, and purposes of adult midlife, and substitutes in their place a style of interiority” (McKee, 1987, p. 24).

Tithonus’ tragic situation is borrowed from the Greek myth involving the goddess of Dawn, Aurora, and her mortal lover, Tithonus. The goddess persuades the gods to grant her mortal lover the gift of immortality,

but neglects to request eternal youth. Tithonus thus ages, shrivels, and becomes so disoriented that Aurora eventually decides to lock him away in a cupboard, “to babble away for the rest of time, or, in a more merciful version, she transformed him into a cicada” (Thane, 2000b, p. 35). Throughout the poem, the speaker rages about the physical changes of his deteriorating body, the prospect of further physical decline, and the ageism he perceives in society’s rejection of the old. He feels vulnerable and alone in an uncaring universe. Aurora hates to see him in this condition but is powerless to change his state. Although Shaw (1976) fails to read the poem in terms of agedness, he makes an interesting point when he says that in “Tithonus,” Tennyson employs commas at the end of lines so that, “instead of being propelled forward, we keep pausing to rest” (p. 94). The poem affords the reader a rare opportunity to enter a senior citizen’s inner world and witness what lurks beneath. It begins with a dark description of nature:

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.
(Tennyson, 2000b, p. 348)

Nature deteriorates, men work the fields and eventually expire, and the swan dies after many years. However, for him, there is no such release, only “cruel immortality” (Tennyson, 2000b, p. 248). Literary critic Ekbert Faas (1988) explains that nature in dramatic monologues serves as a “pathetic fallacy,” and often assumes “pathological dimensions.” It is meant to be recognised as “a psychological feature of the persona” (Faas, 1988, pp. 149-50). Hence, distraught individuals such as Tithonus tend to misinterpret reality through their emotions. It is not nature’s actual appearance that he sees, but a false one, perceived by a person in deep distress. Interestingly, Tennyson’s linking scenery to a state of mind is not limited to “Tithonus” but appears in other poems as well. In 1835, J. S. Mill identified the special kind of scene painting to be found in Tennyson’s poetry in general: “Not the

power of producing that rather vapid species of composition usually termed descriptive poetry . . . but the power of *creating* scenery, in keeping with some state of human feeling so fitted to it as to be the embodied symbol of it, and to summon up the state of feeling itself, with a force not to be surpassed by anything but reality" (Abrams, 2000, p. 1200).

After his dark account of nature, Tithonus proceeds to describe his condition in brief but disturbing detail:

Me only cruel immortality
Consumes; I wither slowly in thine arms,
Here at the quiet limit of the world,
A white-hair'd shadow roaming like a dream.
Tennyson, 2000b, p. 348)

There is much protest in the above-quoted lines regarding his current condition, since he must endure the humiliation of shrivelling slowly in his beloved's arms (on the eastern rim of the world). He feels restless and dejected, more like a ghost than a man. The image of aging the speaker presents is extremely depressing. The negative aspects of the process such as helplessness, decay, and isolation are highlighted, rather than glossed over as in "Ulysses." Kissane (1970) makes an illuminating point when he states, "Tithonus' primary longing is . . . for the recovery of his humanity" (p. 136). This is evident in the poem when the speaker recalls what he was and what he has become. He remembers happier times when he was "once a man," feeling "glorious in his beauty" and in being Aurora's chosen (Tennyson, 2000b, p. 348). At the time, he felt invincible, almost like a "god." However, over the years his beauty withered. Now he ages while Aurora remains forever young, "immortal age beside immortal youth" (Tennyson, 2000b, p. 349).

After dwelling on his present situation, Tithonus begs Aurora to release him:

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
Where all should pause, as is most meet for
all? (Tennyson, 2000b, p. 348)

The speaker is desperate. He pleads with Aurora to liberate him, most likely

through mercy killing (euthanasia), since he no longer desires to be different from other men. Instead, he wants to undergo the same fate. Spoo (2012) supports this view, asserting "The poem is the immortal mortal's frightened prayer for euthanasia to Eos, who, as Tithonus well knows, is helpless to alter what her own wish set in motion" (p. 81).

When a gentle wind parts the clouds, Tithonus observes "the dark world where [he] was born" (Tennyson, 2000b, p. 349). Instead of longing to return, he curses the Earth by calling it "dark" because he feels alienated and rejected by his fellow man, which relates to segregation of the elderly (discussed earlier). Whereas Ulysses maintains a sense of wellbeing through his integration into society, family life, and circle of friends, Tithonus, by contrast, finds himself separated and shunned. Gerontologists strongly caution against age-segregating practices, as they can result in devastating effects on senior citizens. McKee (1987) states, "When the elderly are segregated without consideration of their own interests and desire, it may be discriminatory," adding, "Gerontologists affirm the importance of including the elderly in the mainstream of community life" (McKee, 1987, p. 126). Tithonus conveys a sense of the loneliness and decline resulting from undesired isolation of the elderly. He feels rejected and spurned by society, and in turn rejects "that dark world where [he] was born."

The monologist then turns his attention to Aurora, who renews herself with the coming of each dawn. This continuous renewal saddens the goddess when she looks at Tithonus in contrast. Her tears make him uneasy, as they serve only to confirm that "The gods themselves cannot recall their gifts," and his state will last forever (Tennyson, 2000b, p. 349).

Tithonus proves a hopeless invalid, fortunate only in that he still retains his mental capacity. Despite his worsening physical disabilities, he shows no signs of dementia, recalling past events with clarity:

Ay me! ay me! with what another heart
 In days far-off, and with what other eyes
 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
 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
 Whispering I knew not what of wild and sweet,
 Like that strange song I heard Apollo sing.
 (Tennyson, 2000b, pp. 349-50)

Tithonus remembers his past, and like Ulysses undergoes the process of "life review." While Ulysses recollects only his heroic deeds, Tithonus centres his memory solely on his physical beauty and youthfulness. He recalls when he used to watch the outline of the dawn materialising around the goddess, the soft "curls" of her hair forming into "sunny rings," his blood pumping as the day would warm, while he exchanged passionate kisses more fragrant than flower buds (Tennyson, 2000b, pp. 349-50). The goddess would then whisper into his ear with a voice so enchanting that it seemed as though the god of music himself was singing.

The monologist's musings about his past are absorbing. Everything was "dewywarm" then. By contrast, all is now "cold," evident when he says, "Coldly thy rosy shadows bathe me, cold / Are all thy lights, and cold my wrinkled feet" (Tennyson, 2000b, p. 350). As in the opening lines of the poem, the frosty environment here is most likely a projection of his mood.

Tithonus' recollection of past events leads to overwhelming confusion, an inability to understand the basic meaning and direction of life. This kind of confusion, gerontologists explain, "is a common occurrence in life review. For besides bringing clear understanding of issues of value and meaning in life, the process of life review can raise unanswerable dilemmas" (Butler, 1963, p. 67). Simpson (1972) also touches upon the subject of memory when he asserts, "Memory, a unique form of private perception

which coalesces past and present, receives a . . . negative qualification in *Tithonus*, where it is generalized as a source of pain and dissatisfaction with Aurora's world." Simpson believes Tithonus' recollections are painful because they remind him of his present situation, however, not in terms of aging, as this study maintains, but rather in terms of the private world of aestheticism, where the artist/poet is isolated (Simpson, 1972, p. 911).

The monologist experiences deep emptiness, anomie, and feelings of inferiority. He dwells upon the physical manifestations of advanced old age and convinces himself that he has become repulsive. He is "wither[ed]," "gray," "beat . . . down," "marr'd," "wasted," and "maim'd" (Tennyson, 2000b, p. 348). The punishing irony of old age in Tithonus' view is that he must lose his physicality.

The speaker's disposition is morose because he suffers low self-worth. Thus, it seems inevitable that all his capacity for pleasure disappears. Being a narcissist, Tithonus finds himself vile to the point of self-loathing. Unlike Ulysses, who projects a healthy form of narcissism in old age, Tithonus shows only the destructive facet of narcissism. He is obsessed solely with the self, not with "others and the outside world" (Marcuse, 1966, p. 258).

With Tithonus, past and present rush concurrently through his mind, which is the main stage of action. His conflicting life-visions flash one against the other in compelling dramatization of his breaking mind that once again begs for release: "Release me, and restore me to the ground." He implores Aurora to end his life, since through death he would forget "these empty courts," and she would continue to bring the dawn on her silver wheels (Tennyson, 2000b, p. 350).

The speaker is bitter and unhappy because he fails to reach the second form of cognitive growth in old age, "integrative understanding." He proves incapable of rising "above the tensions created between

conflicting opposites as youth and age, love and hate, male and female, life and death" (Erikson, 1975, p. 92). His deteriorating body differs significantly from Aurora's, showing a contrast of opposites. He is "A white-hair'd shadow roaming like a dream," while she "growest beautiful" with time (Tennyson, 2000b, pp. 348-49). Moreover, love and hate are replaced by fear of the unknown. He admits his dread to Aurora, asking "Why wilt thou ever scare me with thy tears / And make me tremble lest a saying learnt" (Tennyson, 2000b, p. 349). Another conflicting tension in the poem is between male and female, as when Tithonus questions the goddess, "How can my nature longer mix with thine?" Also, no union is achieved between life and death. From the start, Tithonus expresses a desire to join "happy men that have the power to die," yet knows this cannot be so (Tennyson, 2000b, p. 349). Tithonus fails to achieve equilibrium between opposite emotions. Accordingly, he experiences these polarities as stressful conflicts between irreconcilable opposites. His struggle is even mirrored in nature. The decay of nature, the physical description of his aged body, and the emphasis on Aurora's youthful appearance all demonstrate that he has not achieved a successful "integrative understanding."

Although "Tithonus" presents a more realistic image of physical decline in old age than "Ulysses," it is tough at times to sympathise with the speaker, since he simply resigns himself to fate and tolerates the disabilities of old age. He is not at all thankful that his mind still functions normally. Instead, he proves consumed by his outer appearance, which ultimately results in emotional distress. However, his behaviour is excusable because he has no support. Thane (2000) notes that one likely source of aid for the elderly is family. Family support, both practical and emotional, "has often been overlooked or undervalued by modern social researchers" (Thane, 2000a, p. 10). When family ties are strong, they provide social contact and psychological

encouragement. In "Tithonus," family is noticeably absent. Therefore, he has no close network to promote his well-being. Ulysses, on the other hand, has plenty of family support. He further has a large support group whom he proudly refers to as "My mariners" (Tennyson, 2000a, p. 80).

With Tithonus, his isolation is more than that of loneliness; it reflects a despair at his inability to pass on cultural forms, "a fundamental developmental need of the elderly" (McKee, 1987, p. 48). Whereas Ulysses successfully achieves "universal moral perspective," Tithonus does not. He is isolated to the point where there is nobody for him to pass on his experience. This is evident in the description of his dwelling, "at the quiet limit of the world," where all is "ever-silent" (Tennyson, 2000b, p. 348). Tithonus is thus deprived of companionship, respect, and status.

CONCLUSION

Although gerontological knowledge was limited in the nineteenth-century, Tennyson nonetheless seems aware of the psychological, social, and cognitive issues associated with growing old. Accordingly, he produced two poems which show the positive and negative polarities of stereotyped elderly individuals that, over time and with the advancement of gerontological research, proved to be the only two models of aging available to mankind in declining years. Tennyson noticed these conflicting and ambiguous representations of old age and brought them to life through his contrasting poems "Ulysses" and "Tithonus." The former portrays old age as a positive experience marked by exciting challenge and adventure, whereas the latter gives a more pessimistic view. Despite the poet's accuracy in depicting the two paradigms of agedness, some critics such as James Kincaid continue to dismiss him as an outdated poet who belongs solely to the nineteenth-century. However, this study has proven otherwise by highlighting the poet's scientific accuracy in depicting the final stage in a person's life. Tennyson's representation of the activity and

disengagement styles of aging in “Ulysses” and “Tithonus” anticipated many of the discoveries of recent gerontology. The poet not only depicted both models accurately but also made a choice—he chose to age well. Despite his failing health, he remained active well into his final years. He worked on the *Idylls*, completing “The Last Tournament” and “Gareth and Lynette” at age sixty-three; at sixty-seven, he climbed one of the highest mountains in his area. He further took to drawing in his late sixties and early seventies. Additionally, at age eighty-two, a year before his death, friends reported that he was dancing and playing musical chairs, challenging the fittest of men. At eighty-three, he finally succumbed to old age and died a peaceful death (Turner, 1976, pp. 31-32). Tennyson’s outward appearance in advanced age is also noteworthy; he was huge, unkempt, and colourful. He dressed eccentrically and was grumpy in manner, yet he impressed everyone. Famed photographer Julia Cameron called him “the most beautiful old man on earth” (Abrams, 2000, p. 1199).

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الإنغماس مقابل الإنعزال عن الحياة في قصيدتي «أوليس» و «تيثونس»
للشاعر الفيكتوري ألفرد تينيسون- من منظور علم الشيخوخة

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الملخص

في العقود الماضية سلط أخصائيو علم الشيخوخة الضوء على جوانب عدة من تجربة التقدم في العمر، فشملت أبحاثهم نماذج من نمط الحياة في هذه المرحلة، وتطور المعرفة لدى كبار السن، والعلاقات بين الأجيال. وقدم بعض الدارسين مؤخراً مشاركات قيمة حول هذه المرحلة العمرية التي يتم إهمالها، كما بدأ كتاب عديدون يبتكرون أبطالاً مسنون، ويسلطون الضوء على قضايا ومشكلات تتعلق بالشيخوخة؛ منها مرض ألزهايمر والشعور بالخسارة والخوف من الوحدة والتمسك بالإيمان. وانضم إلى هؤلاء الكتاب النقاد الأدبيون ليدرسوا نماذج من الأدب تظهر فيها الشخصيات المسنة، بل ليحتفوا بالموهبة الأدبية للأدباء المسنين.

تتناول الدراسة الحالية تجربة تقدم السن في قصيدتي «أوليس» (1842) و «تيثونس» (1860) للشاعر الفيكتوري ألفرد تينيسون. وترسم كلتا القصيدتين نمطين متقابلين من أنماط الحياة في سن الشيخوخة، ألا وهما «الانغماس واستمرارية النشاط» في مقابل «الانعزال عن الحياة»؛ ففي قصيدة «تيثونس» يتضح التأثير السلبي للتغيرات الجسدية المرتبطة بتقدم السن على المتحدث، فيبدو التقدم في العمر بمثابة فناء وتدهور. وعلى العكس من ذلك، فإن المتحدث في قصيدة «أوليس» لا يُلقى بالألوان للتغيرات الجسدية، بل يدرك في المقابل أن مرحلة الشيخوخة هي فرصة للمزيد من التقدم والسعي في تطوير الذات. يواجه المتحدثان في كلتا القصيدتين خيارين متضادين، فإما «النشاط والانغماس» في الحياة أو «الانعزال» والهروب منها، وعليه فإن آراءهما عن الشيخوخة تبرز مهارة تينيسون في التعمق في آثار تقدم السن.

وتتميز هذه الدراسة بأنها تبني تحليلها للقصائد على منظور علم الشيخوخة. وبالرغم من أن تينيسون هو شاعر من القرن التاسع عشر، إلا أنه قد سبق عصره في فهمه لهذه المرحلة من حياة الإنسان، وهو ما يتضح من خلال أسلوبه الذي يتجاوز الحدود بين الأدب والعلم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأدب الإنجليزي، تداخل المجالات، تقدم السن، تينيسون، الشعر، علم الشيخوخة.