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BLEND OF PASSION AND LOGIC IN TENNYSON'S "ULYSSES"

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ABSTRACT

"Ulysses" is one of the most important poems by Lord Tennyson, the representative poet of the Victorian age. The poem records Ulysses's passion for knowledge and adventure as well as his discontent with the domestic life at Ithaca. Emotions and strong passion have always been prevalent in every literature across the globe. The method of representing those passions, however, varies from one piece of literature to another. As a result, different branches of literature have come into being. It goes without saying that Ulysses embodies an insatiable thirst for knowledge. He is the symbol of man's eternal quest for new knowledge. However, the present article is going to show how Ulysses's strong passions go hand in hand with his logical acumen in this poem. In other words, the paper is to exhibit how Tennyson has made a beautiful blend of passion and logic in his dramatic monologue, "Ulysses".

Key words : Passions, logic, knowledge, adventure, argumentation

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INTRODUCTION

There is no denying the fact that "Ulysses" is a superb dramatic monologue by Lord Tennyson. It was composed in 1833 and it came out in 1842. The episode is based on Dante (Inferno,xxvi).Tennyson might have read this in translation of Henry Cary. The background of the episode is worth pointing out. Ulysses and his mariners have returned to Ithaca from the Trojan War after many years . Now, he is living an idle life as the king of Ithaca. As he is a man of action, he finds it impossible to bear with this dull and inactive life at home. His heart always yearns for wanderings and adventures. So, he resolves to set sail and explore new worlds for the rest of his life. In the present poem, he offers a number of logical arguments to justify his passion for adventure and his thirst for knowledge. However, the history of the poem's composition is no less important. The sudden death of Tennyson's friend A.H.Hallam dealt a death blow to the poet. He was simply drowned in the ocean of grief and despair. He was on the verge of losing all interests in life. After a brief period of grief, despair and lethargy, Tennyson, however , felt the urge to move forward and face the challenges of life boldly. His determination to brave the struggle of life has inspired the present poem. This can be seen in the concluding line of the poem: "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield "

Alfred Lord Tennyson was born in 1809. He was the son of a clergyman. After his schooling, he went to Cambridge University to pursue higher studies. But he left the university without taking a degree. Then he spent twenty years in tranquillity. He continued to write poetry. He became the Poet Laureate in 1850. Gradually, he won recognition and applause for his poetry. Indeed, he came to be considered the greatest poet of his day.

It is interesting to note that Tennyson produced a number of beautiful poems which not only fetched him name and fame but also enriched English literature to a large extent. Of his important poems, mention may be made of "Isabel", "Madeline", "The Lady of Shalott", "The Palace of Art", "Ulysses", "Tithonus", "Locksley Hall", "The Princess" and "In Memoriam". The poem "The Princess" deals with the theme of the 'new women' in a serio – comic manner. "In Memoriam" is an elegy on the death of Tennyson's college friend, Arthur Henry Hallam. In fact, it is a long series of meditations on life and death. Another important poem by Tennyson is "Maud" which was called 'a monodrama'. It contains a series of lyrics showing the feelings and conflicts of a lover who has escaped to France after killing the brother of his mistress. Tennyson's "Idylls of the King" deals with King Arthur and the Round Table. Last but not least, "Enoch Arden" is another important poem by Tennyson. Here we come across a seaman who was supposedly drowned but is now alive. He returns home only to find that his wife has married another man. Out of regret, he goes back without making his presence felt. Albert has aptly pointed out :

"He (Tennyson) is not a supreme poet...but after all deductions are made, his high place in the Temple of Fame is Assured"(375)

At the very outset, Ulysses tries to justify his dissatisfaction with the dull life that he has to live at Ithaca. He begins to present logical arguments in order to justify his passion for adventure. A number of factors are responsible for his discontent with the domestic life. For instance, he has to lead the life of an idle king among the 'barren crags' despite the fact that he is a man of action. The next reason is that he is compelled to live in the company of an 'aged wife'. What adds to his discontent is the fact that he has to "mete and dole / unequal laws unto a savage race". His subjects simply eat, drink and amass wealth. They do not care for anything else. They neither know nor appreciate Ulysses's passion for knowledge and adventure. Hence, he declares his decision to devote the rest of his life to the pursuit of knowledge and adventure. He announces:

"I cannot rest from travel : I will drink
Life to the lees..."

There can be little doubt that an indomitable passion reigns supreme in Ulysses. Nothing on earth can suppress it. To justify and nourish his passion, Ulysses has recourse to logic and arguments. Ulysses recalls his past life which was full of adventures and hazards. He has roamed through different countries. He has met different people and known their manners. His passion for adventure reveals itself :

"And drunk delight of battle with my peers ,
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.
I am part of all that I have met."

Now, he presents another logical argument to prove his point. He argues that all experiences taken together simply let us know that we are yet to gather the lion's share of the world's knowledge. To put it differently, knowledge is limitless and therefore one will never be able to acquire all the knowledge. Ulysses rightly remarks:

"Yet all experience is an arch where thro'
Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move"

It goes without saying that this is one of the most beautiful reasons for his determination to spend the rest of his life exploring new fields and gathering fresh knowledge.

It is no exaggeration to say that while going through the present poem, one is likely to be carried away by the intense passions that stem from Ulysses's heart. At the same time, it is also worth pointing out that logic has been used very skillfully throughout the poem. The speaker, Ulysses, proceeds to present

another reason for his decision to keep on travelling and exploring new lands. For him, action constitutes the essence of life while rest amounts to dullness and death. He uses a beautiful metaphor to bring home the point. Life is, as it were, a sword. It will shine only when it is in use. When left unused, a sword rusts and becomes useless. In the same way, life becomes dull and useless if it is not spent in activities. That is why Ulysses must continue to lead an active life. His profound passion for an active life is quite unmistakable in the following lines:

“How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!
As tho’ to breathe were life”.

That Ulysses is making the best use of logic to prove his point is crystal clear to us. He offers another strong reason for his preference for a life of action. He is of the opinion that “life piled on life” is not enough for the acquisition of all the knowledge. He is given only one life. A few years are now left to him at present. Moreover, he believes that an hour spent in adventure or activities is saved from “that eternal silence” and it is “a bringer of new things”. So, he should devote the rest of his life to the quest for knowledge and adventure:

“To follow knowledge, like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought”.

Despite his love for adventure in unknown places, Ulysses has to keep in mind the concerns for his kingdom. Once again, he has recourse to logical arguments to prove that he is right in his decision to set sail anew. He announces that his son Telemachus possesses all the qualities of a good ruler. Ulysses is confident that his son will succeed in performing both his public duties and his private ones. He, therefore, has decided to leave the sceptre and the isle” to Telemachus. Hence, he has every reason to undertake a new voyage with his mariners.

Being a lover of adventure and exploration, Ulysses cannot help feeling excited at the sight of the port, the vessel and the dark broad seas. In the concluding part of the poem, he addresses his mariners and tries to motivate them to set sail once again. Even in this situation, his passions are expressed through logical arguments. He argues that though he and his mariners have grown old, they must perform some heroic deeds before their death. One should toil hard to win honours even in old age :

“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”.

He goes on to motivate his mariners by pointing out that it is not too late to start a new voyage. He makes it abundantly clear that his purpose is as follows :

“To sail beyond sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die”

Ulysses further enthuses them with the argument that though Time has snatched their physical energy and vigour, their will power remains intact. As they have retained their indomitable spirit, they should undertake a fresh voyage :

“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”

CONCLUSION

To sum up, one must point out that Ulysses stands for the insatiable thirst for knowledge. He proves to be the embodiment of the urge to know the unknown and to see the unseen. His passions for adventure and fresh knowledge have made him an immortal figure in the world of literature. Had he not been a mythical character, he would have survived through the present poem. However, logic and logical arguments never desert him, not in the moment of ecstasy. He presents his arguments one after another to strengthen his point. This fine combination of passion and logic will surely bring “Ulysses” a secure place in the hearts of the readers.

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