

On Tennyson's Necrophilia

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Abstract

Death is the most outstanding motif in Alfred Tennyson's poems. Tennyson was so obsessed with death that in his poems necrophilia becomes a phenomenon worthy of careful study. Tennyson's necrophilia is shown or suggested in two aspects. On the one hand, carcasses, graves, charnels and ghosts are the most common factors Tennyson frequently resourced to in his poems; on the other hand, the fall of ancient civilizations and manslaughter are continually elaborated on in his poems. All these are employed to bring about terror and melancholy, which are expected to move the sensitive hearts of readers, to tears. In one word, necrophilia more or less equals Tennysonian poetics.

Keywords: Alfred Tennyson, necrophilia, Tennysonian aesthetics

Generally speaking, necrophilia means the extreme interest in the dead, especially the sexual attraction felt by someone towards dead bodies. In this article, necrophilia refers to the strong emotional attachment Tennyson showed towards death and things or scenes connected with death. Tennyson's necrophilia is seen from his detailed and tangible description of carcasses (normally rotten or rotting), human bones and skull, graves, charnels, manslaughter or holocaust and fall or decline of the old civilizations.

1. Carcasses, Skeletons, Graves, Charnels and Ghosts

Carcasses, graves, charnels and ghosts are Tennyson's favorites, especially in his early poems. The carcasses or corpses Tennyson described are normally dead bodies, which are

rotten or rotting, sending out swooning smell. Skeletons in Tennyson's poems are generally human bones and skulls. Graves or graveyards are the frequent haunts, usually with the apparitions or ghosts, for his poems, and it is also true of charnels. Among these images charnels merit a little further elaboration.

A charnel house or to be short, a charnel, is the place where dead bodies or human bones are laid. It dated back to the end of the 18th century in the western countries such as France, Britain and Germany. By then quite a lot of people had been buried alive as a result of their own apparent death. Many people took part of their own bodies for food while waiting for death in the graves. To avoid further tragedies, a decree was passed to have charnel houses built to store bodies of those who had just died for a period of time. The authentic sign for these bodies to be carried away and buried was that the bodies had begun to rot. Consequently, many charnel houses were built. (Vovelle, 2004, p. 408) The charnel house confronts those looking after the assumed dead people with death, both through the sense of smell and the sense of sight, and sometimes even through the sense of sound.

It is impossible to read Tennyson's early poems without sighting carcasses. "The Coach of Death" was written when Tennyson was about 16. The poem reveals that teenage Tennyson had a fondness for carcasses. The Coach of Death is entering the Nether World through various grisly scenes, and the vivid description of carcasses adds to the horror of the scenes. "But the rusty sign of a skull and cross-bones / Swung creaking before the Inn." (Tennyson, 1969, p. 76) "As the quick wheels brushed, and threw up the dust / Of dead men's pulverized bones". (Tennyson, 1969, p. 78) "And heads without bodies and shapes without heads / Went leaping here and there." (Tennyson, 1969, p. 78) The air is thick with dust and odor of human bodies.

Tennyson, as a ghoul, a word he used quite often, indulged in bringing about such thrilling and nauseating terror.

Rotting or rotten corpses are strewn in Tennyson's poems, especially in the early ones. Terror is produced with these bodies. We may be terrified while seeing the vulgar woman insulting a corpse in "Come hither, canst thou tell me if this skull" (1824-26):

There came a woman from the crowd and smote
The corpse upon the cheek: to earth it fell,
That eye was dim, that glorious tongue was mute,
The soul had fled receptacle. (Tennyson, 1969, p. 153)

Likewise, in "The Palace of Art" (1832), the heads of the kings are presented in a lightsome and playful tone: "Here played, a tiger, rolling to and fro / The Heads and crowns of Kings" (Tennyson, 1969, p. 140). The playfulness is in sharp contrast with the terror thus exerted.

Tennyson was never thrifty with words when he came to describe the decayed or decaying bodies. Hence in "The Vision of Sin" (1839) we can see "Below were men and horses pierced with worms" (Tennyson, 1969, p. 725), and in "The Sailor Boy" (1849) the mermaid prophesies the frightful death of the boy: "And on thy ribs the limpet sticks, / And in thy heart the scrawl shall play." (Tennyson, 1969, p. 829). In "Battle of Brunanburh" (1876-77) the dead soldiers decay and were helplessly left to be fed on by vultures:

Many a carcase they left to be carrion,
Many a livid one, many a sallow-skin –
Left for the white tailed eagle to tear it, and
Left for the horny-nibbed raven to rend it, and

Gave to the garbaging war-hawk to gorge it, and

That gray beast, the wolf of the weald. (Tennyson, 1969, p. 238)

And in “Merlin and Vivien” (1856) the sad Merlin predicts the doom of mages:

Their heads should moulder on the city gates.

And many tried and failed, because the charm

Of nature in her overbore their own:

And many a wizard brow bleached on the walls:

And many weeks a troop of carrion crows

Hung like a cloud above the gateway towers. (Tennyson, 1969, p. 1611)

The scene of death in this poem echoes that in an early poem, namely, “The Coach of Death”, in which death is presented to the readers’ eyes, ears and noses.

In fact, Tennyson was so used to these reeking corpses that when he referred to his own dead body in “The Christian Penitent” (1832), the tone is extremely calm: “...nor let the sod / Feed from my mouldering frame Thy flowers and grass / Before I know Thy Love which is and was” (Tennyson, 1969, p. 468)

Besides the odorous corpses, Tennyson also liked to show the remains of human bodies after decay. “The Vale of Bones”, which is written at the same period, presents human skeletons long after rotting:

But who are they, whose bones bestrew

The heather, cold with midnight dew,

Upon whose slowly-rotting clay

The raven long hath ceased to prey

But, mouldering in the moon-light air,

Their wan, white skulls show bleak and bare? (Tennyson, 1969, p. 98)

The eyeless socket, dark and dull,

The hideous grinning of the skull,

Are sights which Memory disowns,

Thou melancholy Vale of Bones! (Tennyson, 1969, p. 100)

The vale strewn with human bones and skulls arouses melancholy in the narrator.

Similarly, the line “But when I saw thee cold in death”(Tennyson, 1969, p. 134) in “On a Dead Enemy” (1826-30) triggers off pathos in the readers, “The Grave of a Suicide” (1824-26), with “Where ’neath the dewy turf thy form is laid” (Tennyson, 1969, p. 123), also stimulates people’s sorrow, and the same is also true of the bones under the moonlight in “Inverlee” (1826):

Then pierce the subterranean dusk

In the brick walls at Inverlee,

Through the close coffin’s mouldering husk,

Among the white bones gleamingly. (Tennyson, 1969, p. 160)

And one is expected to be struck with sadness while reading “Where Claribel low-lieth / The breezes pause and die” (Tennyson, 1969, p. 181) in “Claribel” (1826-30). Likewise, the deploring of the corpses of those unknown people who died in the past in “The Day-Dream” (1834) also appeals to our melancholy:

The bodies and bones of those

That strove in other days to pass,
Are withered in the thorny close,

Or scattered blanching on the grass. (Tennyson, 1969, p. 628)

And it is also true of the inert life in the past which is hopelessly wished for by the gloomy sailors in “The Lotos-Eaters” (1830-32). However, the past is irrevocably gone with the dead of the old folks: “With those old faces of our infancy / Heaped over with a mound of grass, / Two handfuls of white dust, shut in an urn of brass!” (Tennyson, 1969, p. 434)

In “Rizpah” (1878), a poem about a mother who risks her life to steal the bones of her executed son, pathos (perhaps combined with terror) reaches the climax when the mother passionately kisses the bones of her child:

My baby, the bones that had sucked me, the bones that had laughed and had cried –
Theirs? O no! they are mine – not theirs – they had moved in my side.

Do you think I was scared by the bones? I kissed ’em, I buried ’em all –

I can’t dig deep, I am old – in the night by the churchyard wall. (Tennyson, 1969, p. 248)

The sensation aroused with the mother wildly weeping and kissing the white bones renders her a typical Gothic persona.

Corpses are easily available for Tennyson to use figuratively. In “Perdidi Diem” (1826-30), the narrator deplores his pitiful life and compares himself to a corpse: “My being is a vacant worthlessness, / A carcase in the coffin of this flesh, / Pierced through with loathly worms of utter Death.” (Tennyson, 1969, p. 269) The same words appear in a later poem,

“Pierced through with knotted thorns of barren pain” (1832). In “The Flight” (about 1836), the girl’s firm determination not to marry the man she despises can be seen from her use of hyperbole: “I’d sooner fold an icy corpse dead of some foul disease: / Wed him? I will not wed him, let them spurn me from the doors”. (Tennyson, 1969, p. 659) In addition, Tennyson, in “To – After Reading a Life and Letters” (about 1848), condemned those who had published Keats’s wild love-letters and compared them to vultures: “For whom the carrion vulture waits / To tear his heart before the crowd!” (Tennyson, 1969, p. 848) This poem is to be echoed in a later poem, “The Dead Prophet” (1882-84). The dead prophet refers to John Carlyle, whose private life had been publicized by the press. Tennyson was outraged and compared the publisher to a blood-thirsty witch:

She tumbled his helpless corpse about.

‘Small blemish upon the skin!

But I think we know what is fair without

Is often as foul within.’

She crouched, she tore him part from part,

And out of his body she drew

The red ‘Blood-eagle’ of liver and heart;

She held them up to the view;

She gabbled, as she groped in the dead,

And all the people were pleased;

‘See, what a little heart,’ she said,

‘And the liver is half-diseased! (Tennyson, 1969, p. 1326)

Not only the witch is blood-thirsty and corpse-crazy, as we can see, but also Tennyson himself.

Graves, graveyards, and charnel houses usually haunted by ghosts are the favorite settings for Tennyson’s poems. We can see the grave in “And ask ye why these sad tears stream” (1824-26): “I had a dream – a lovely dream, / Of her that in the grave is sleeping.” (Tennyson, 1969, p. 115) In “On Sublimity”, graves, charnels, ghosts are included in what is sublime: “The grave, the ghastly charnel-house of death /.../ What time the tomb above them yawns and gapes: / For thou dost hold communion with the dead, / Phantoms and phantasies and grisly shapes; / And shades and headless specters of St Mark”. (Tennyson, 1969, p. 117) And, the narrator in an excitedly sad tone recounts his mid-night walk in “The Walk at Midnight” (1824-26):

There in the chilling bed of earth,

The charnel’s lettered stone above –

There sleepeth she who gave me birth,

Who taught my lips the hymn of love! (Tennyson, 1969, p. 125)

The pathos thus aroused in the poem can also be found in “Inverlee”: “Black nettles crowd the charnel tombs / Along the church of Inverlee”. (Tennyson, 1969, p. 160)

In “Vastness” (1885), Tennyson compared humans’ fleshly bodies to coffins: “What is it all, if we all of us end but in being our own corpse-coffins at last” (Tennyson, 1969, p. 1348). This metaphor has similar precedents. In “Perdidi Diem” human frame is compared to a charnel: “My soul is but the eternal mystic lamp, / Lighting that charnel damp”. (Tennyson, 1969, p. 269) Likewise, in “Pierced through with knotted thorns of barren pain”, human bodies are

compared to coffins and charnels:

A carcase in the coffin of this flesh,

Pierced through with loathly worms of utter death.

And in that spiritual charnel low and damp

All my past thoughts and actions I did mark

Thick-thronging to and fro amid the gloom. (Tennyson, 1969, pp. 472-473)

In Section LVIII of *In Memoriam A. H. H.*, Tennyson compared his own voice to the sound in the tomb:

In those sad words I took farewell:

Like echoes in sepulchral halls,

As drop by drop the water falls

In vaults and catacombs, they fell; (Tennyson, 1969, p. 913)

Tennyson's self-pity can be seen from such metaphor and similes.

Ghost is something Tennyson liked and believed in. "On the night his father finally died (March of 1831) he slept in the old man's bed in the hope of seeing his ghost. It may of course have been Alfred's only chance of a bed to himself: the corpse lay in a barn that night because typhoid was suspected." (Levi, 1993, p. 49) Ghost appears in "The Flight": "The Fiend would yell, the grave would yawn, my mother's ghost would rise –" (Tennyson, 1969, p. 659) In "Forlorn" (1854), the deserted girl dreams of ghost:

There is laughter down in Hell

At your simple scheming...

In the night, in the night,

When the ghosts are fleeting. (Tennyson, 1969, p. 1032)

Ghosts and apparitions add to the melancholy and terror of the tone and atmosphere.

Ghosts appear in many other poems, such as “The Mother’s Ghost” (1833-34), “Oh! Ye wild winds, that roar and rave” (1824-26), “Walking to the Mail” (1837-38), “The Wreck” (1883-84), and “The Ring” (1887-89), to name just a few.

In short, Carcasses, skeletons, graves and charnels are frequently employed by Tennyson to achieve his aims, namely, terror and melancholy, which are sublime in terms of Tennysonian aesthetics.

2. Falls of Ancient Civilizations and Manslaughter

Besides the indispensable addictedness to corpses, graves, charnels, and ghosts, Tennyson was in favor of the direct presentation of holocaust in tangible details. He seemed to enjoy the grisly and miserable scenes of death. In his poems, he was as blood-thirsty as a vampire.

Manslaughter or homicide frequently occurs in poems about the falls of ancient civilizations. Like Shelley, the young Tennyson liked to deplore the passage of the past empires or kingdoms. The primary cause is perhaps his recognition of the mortality and mutability of the secular world. In “A Lament”, Shelley deplored the transience and futility of human life:

O World! O Life, O Time!

On whose last steps I climb,

Trembling at that where I had stood before;

When will return the glory of your prime?

No more – Oh, never more!

Out of the day and night

A joy has taken flight:

Fresh spring, and summer, and winter hoar

Move my faint heart with grief, but with delight.

No more – Oh, never more! (Shelley, 1929a, p. 308)

We can see that although the mutability of life made Shelley sad, it also moved his heart “with delight”. The poem is collected in the popular *The Golden Treasury*, an anthology of English poems edited by Francis Turner Palgrave, who was a close friend of Tennyson. It is thanks to Palgrave that Tennyson’s playful “Early Verses of Compliment to Miss Rosa Baring” (1834) has survived up to now. (Levi, 1993, p. 131) “A Lament” is echoed in Tennyson’s “No More” (1826):

Oh sad *No More!* Oh sweet *No More!*

Oh strange *No More!*

By a mossed brookbank of a stone

I smelt a wildweed-flower alone;

There was a ringing in my ears,

And both my eyes gushed out with tears.

Surely all pleasant things had gone before,

Low buried fathom deep beneath with thee, NO MORE! (Tennyson, 1969, p. 161)

Shelley’s emotional response to the transience and futility of life is grief with delight, and Tennyson’s is sweetness combined with sadness. Both of them had a morbid delight in the

lamentation of the demise of things. According to Shelley, this worldly life is futile because the world is dominated by mutability:

We are as clouds that veil the midnight moon;

How restless they speed, and gleam, and quiver,

Streaking the darkness radiantly! – yet soon

Night closes round, and they are lost for ever:

.....

It is the same! – For, be it joy or sorrow,

The path of its departure still is free:

Man's yesterday may ne'er be like his morrow;

Nought may endure but Mutability. (Shelley, 1998, p. 117)

Because everything submits to mutability, the past empires collapse one after another, and words by any emperor or king to laud and show off his own greatness seem vain and ludicrous. Ozymandias in Shelley's "Ozymandias of Egypt" is a case in point. Ozymandias, the ancient Egyptian emperor, has had his own statue set up. Eons later, a traveler notices that the visage of the statue is smattered and sunk in the sand,

And on the pedestal these words appear:

'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:

Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay

Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare

The lone and level sands stretch far away. (Shelley 1929b, p. 251)

The endless, lone and level sands stand for the indifferent eternity, which devours everything. Likewise, Byron deplored the decline of the glorious ancient Greece in his famous “Isles of Greece”, a group of lyrical poems in *Don Juan*. As we have concluded, Tennyson not only read Byron and Shelley but also admired them. Following their mode, Tennyson showed the decline of the old civilizations, which is usually accompanied by homicide or holocaust.

“God’s Denunciations against Pharaoh-Hophra, or Apries” (1824-26), one of Tennyson’s early poems, shows his preference to blood. God condemns the conceited Pharaoh-Hophra, who thinks his power will last forever, and tells the complacent pharaoh that Egypt is going to be destroyed by the Babylonians and slaughter is on its way:

Woe, woe to thee, Nile! For thy stream shall be red

With the blood that shall gush o’er thy billowy bed!

Woe, woe to thee, Memphis! The war-cry is near,

And the child shall be tossed on the murderer’s spear; (Tennyson, 1969, p. 123)

The poem is red with the blood in the Nile and on the murderer’s spear. Blood also stains “Babylon” (1824-26). Isaiah announces the future destruction of Babylon by Cyrus with vivid details of man-killing: “With the blood of thy children his path shall be red, / ... / and your sons and your sires and your daughters shall bleed / By the barbarous hands of the murdering Mede!” (Tennyson, 1969, p. 143)

In “A Fragment (Where is the Giant of the Sun)” the fall of the ancient Egypt is once again mourned over, although pathos is not consolidated with killing, but with dried corpses,

or mummies:

The Pharaohs are no more: somewhere in death

They sleep with staring eyes and gilded lips,

Wrapped round with spiced cerements in old grots

Rock-hewn and sealed for ever. (Tennyson, 1969, p. 290)

The stare of the mummified pharaohs sets off the pathetic decline of Egypt.

Egypt was conquered by the Babylonians, Babylon was conquered by Cyrus, who established the powerful Empire of Persia, and Persia in turn was conquered by Alexander. “Persia” (1824-26) is about the conquest of Persia by Alexander. The conquest also reeks of blood: “Mid clashing shield and spear transfixing, / The rival brothers sternly closed.” (Tennyson, 1969, p. 103)

India is another cradle of early civilization. Its fall is shown in “The Expedition of Nadir Shah into Hindostan” (1824-26). When it collapses, “...all Delhi runs red with the blood of her slain.” (Tennyson, 1969, p. 109) Although Rome is not as antique as India in history, it is one of the cradles for Western civilization. It falls to the hands of the Gothic warriors, and, of course, blood is inevitable: “What length of blood train before me, / In slow succession passes by! /...../ Her babes are dashed against the stones!” (Tennyson, 1969, p. 108)

Besides these poems, “The Fall of Jerusalem” (1824-26), as the title indicates, is about the decline of Jerusalem; “Lamentation of the Peruvians” (1824-26) is about the collapse of Lima established by Pizarro; “Mithridates Presenting Berenice with the Cup of Poison” (1824-26) is about the downfall of Mithridates of Pontus; “Alexander” (1832) is about the conquest of Persia, which is under the leadership of Darius, by Alexander; and “Morte D’Arthur” (1833-

34) and later *Idylls of the King* (1856-72) lament the decline of a high and noble culture represented by the death of King Arthur and his kingdom. The change of powers is accompanied by bloody slaughter.

The vivid and detailed presentation of manslaughter is not confined to the above-mentioned poems. In “King Charles’s Vision” (1824-26), Charles sees Alexander, the future king, killing on his way:

For a blue livid flame, round the hall where he came,

In fiery circles ran;

And sounds of death, and chattering teeth,

And gibbering tongues began.

.....

While short and thick came the mingled shriek

Of the wretches who died by his blow;

And fast fell each head on the pavement red,

And warm did the life-blood flow. (Tennyson, 1969, pp. 149-151)

Alexander in turn predicts his own assassination:

‘And blood shall be shed, and the earth shall be red

‘With the gore of misery;

‘And swift as this flame shall the light of my fame

‘O’er the world as brightly fly.’ (Tennyson, 1969, p. 152)

The grisly scenes of killing and being killed are presented with visual, aural and tactile images.

One cannot help but feel terrified while reading the poem.

“The Ballad of Oriana” (1826-30) tells the story of a warrior who kills his lover by mistake. We can deeply feel his remorse when he curses the deadly arrow: “The damned arrow glanced aside, / And pierced thy heart, my love, my bride”. (Tennyson, 1969, p. 249) The word “pierced” is so cruelly used that we can hear her tender, pure heart being rived by the sharp arrow. A masochistic exultation is thus produced.

Revenge is the theme of “The Sisters” (1831). The narrator avenges her dead sister on the earl, although “O the Earl was fair to see.” (Tennyson, 1969, p. 398) Thus she feels a kind of masochistic or sexual excitement by stabbing the earl with a knife: “Three times I stabbed him through and through” (Tennyson, 1969, p. 399). She then daringly carries the bodies to his mother: “I wrapt his body in the sheet, / And laid his body at his mother’s feet” (Tennyson, 1969, p. 399) An Amazon is thus presented to us with gushing blood.

The idea that beautiful women always die a pathetic and horrible death is indicated in “A Dream of Fair Women” (1831-32). The beauties described in the poem include Iphigenia, Cleopatra, Jephthah’s daughter, Rosamond and so on. Iphigenia dies when “The bright death quivered at the victim’s throat” (Tennyson, 1969, p. 446), Cleopatra is bitten by the deadly asp to death, Jephthah’s daughter is burned to death, and Rosamond is poisoned to death. The poem is full of details of man-killing. For example, Rosalind is encouraged to stab Eleanor: “You should have clung to Fulva’s waist, and thrust / The dagger through her side.” (Tennyson, 1969, p. 452) The readers can also see Margaret Roper “who clasped in her trance / Her murdered father’s head” (Tennyson, 1969, p. 452)

These poems are just a few examples to show Tennyson’s indulgence in grisly scenes of homicide. Tennyson’s poems are rife with more examples of this kind, such as “Margaret”

(1832), “The Tournay” (1849), “The Christ of Ammergau” (1870) and so forth.

The grisly scenes of manslaughter, together with carcasses, skeletons, charnels, graves and ghosts, are common phenomena in Tennyson’s poems. They are employed to bring about terror and melancholy, which are expected to move at least the sensitive heart of Tennyson, if not the sensitive hearts of the readers, to tears.

To be brief, in his early years Tennyson normally wrote about death not because the impending death harassed him, but, quite on the contrary, mainly because he loved the sad sweetness death could bring about. In a word, he wrote death usually for death’s sake. Necrophilia is the synonym of Tennysonian aesthetics.

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