

Tennyson's "Tithonus"

1. The **genre** of the poem is **dramatic monologue**.

Characteristics of a dramatic monologue:

1. somebody is speaking
2. the whole poem is the character's speech
3. the character is in a dramatic setting; there is a particular audience, time, and place.
4. the reader must determine from hints in the poem:
 - A. the identity of the speaker
 - B. the identity of the audience & the relationship between them
 - C. the setting & time
 - D. the speaker's purpose.

The whole poem is the speech of Tithonus who is now a very old man. He is addressing Eos, the goddess of dawn asking her to take away her gift of immortality. Tithonus' monologue is dominated by his great suffering because Eos granted him immortality but forgot to give him eternal youth. The monologue does four functions:

1. It provides background information on Tithonus' story, how he was in love with Eos and how she wanted to make him mortal but forgot to grant him eternal youth.
2. It presents the great magnitude of his present suffering and regret for asking for the gift of immortality. Eternal life becomes a curse rather than a blessing.
3. It shows that this gift cannot be reversed or undone even by the gods themselves so that Tithonus shall stay in eternal suffering.
4. It recreates the classical myth of Tithonus from the perspective of the Victorian age by dramatizing the human element that the original myth is effacing.

However, Tennyson's dramatic monologue in "Tithonus" is less colloquial and not sharply dramatic because of the predominance of the note of complaint in Tithonus' monologue and the over emphasis on the presence of Eos as the addressee of Tithonus.

2. Classical Myth

Tennyson used the classical myth of Tithonus who was the beloved of Eos, the goddess of dawn. He asked Eos to grant him immortality. She granted his request but forgot to grant him eternal youth. Unfortunately, the gift was irreversible as it was not in the capacity of gods to do so. The gift turned into a curse as he was reduced to a very old man. He was finally turned into a grasshopper.

Tennyson was not interested in reporting this myth literally in his poem. He was interested in presenting this myth from a Victorian standpoint. His presentation of this myth focuses on the human suffering resulting from living eternally with an ever-decaying body. This dimension is not available in the original version of the Greek myth. Tennyson gives this myth a realistic treatment by giving insight into the nature of mortality and humanity. Tithonus longs to be human again asking Eos to release him and “restore him to the ground.” He even calls the dead as “happier” at the end of the poem. Tennyson takes mortality as the very essence of humanity.