

Tithonus

By Lord Alfred Tennyson

Introduction: ‘Tithonus’ is written in the form of a dramatic monologue in which only one speaker is used to tell an entire story. There is no consistent rhyme scheme or pattern of meter in the piece, meaning that it is written in blank or free verse. “Tithonus” was first written under the title “Tithon” in 1833. It did not appear to a wide readership until 1859 when it was published under its full name. While not one of Tennyson’s most popular or well known pieces, “Tithonus” is characteristic of the poet’s style and a wonderful example of his ability to expand on already existing myths and legends.

Summary of Tithonus

“Tithonus” by Lord Alfred Tennyson describes the plight of Tithonus who is cursed to an immortal life in which he continues to age. The poem begins with the speaker, Tithonus, desiring how sorrowful the naturally aging woods make him. Unlike all the other elements of the world, he is unable to die. He cannot, as they do, return to the earth and become something new. He is slowly being consumed by the hours of his life that will never end. He is stuck in the “East” with his once beloved Eos who is the cause of his wretched state, (see About the Myth for more details).

The speaker describes himself as no longer being a man, but a mere shadow who is forced to see the never aging face of his beloved every morning. In the next few lines he quickly outlines how he came to be this way. He describes asking Eos for immortality and her granting it to him without considering his youth. He will never pass beyond the “goal of ordinance” or reach death, as other men do. It is obvious to him now the mistake he has made. Every morning of Tithonus’ life he is forced to see the sun rise and observe Eos’ chariot take her into the sky where he once adored her. Everyday he asks her to take back what she has given, but receives no answer. He fears that she is unable to retract something she has given out.

About the Myth

Tithonus is a character that features in Greek mythology and is the son of a King of Troy, Laomedon. His mother was born of the river Scamander. In the story, Eos, or Aurora, the embodiment of dawn, fell in love with Tithonus. Together they had two children. After this, in a effort to stay with her beloved forever, Eos asks the god Zeus to grant Tithonus eternal life. Zeus agreed to this proposition but Eos had not be specific enough. Tithonus was to live forever, but also continue aging. He would not retain his youth as Eos would. Throughout his long life Tithonus continued to age, never reaching the threshold of death. In Tennyson's version of this myth it is not Zeus that grants immortality but Eos herself.

Analysis:

First Stanza

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.

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

The ever-silent spaces of the East,

Far-folded mists, and gleaming halls of morn.

The poem begins with the poet's speaker, Tithonus, son of Laomedon, a King of Troy,

bemoaning his immortality as he looks around the woods. Around him he can see the “woods decay.” He repeats phrase twice for emphasis as this simple act of life moving on to death is beyond the realm of his understanding. After decaying the woods, “fall,” and a “vapour” or mist covers the ground. This vapor is part of the process of reincarnation through which every living thing participates. “The vapors weep their burthen to the ground,” and the men come along and till the field and all that lies within it. The earth is reused and reborn, every living thing goes through this except for Tithonus. Tithonus is alone in the world. He is isolated by immortality and he despises it. Many member of mankind has desired for the ability to live forever. Tithonus was no exception and his story, and how he came to hate his own eternal life will be described by the speaker throughout the poem. He is being “consumed” by his own immortality and is “slowly” withering within his own arms. There is no one there to soothe him who can understand what he is going through, so he must take comfort in his own presence. In the next lines he describes himself as a “white-hair’d shadow” that is traveling the world in a dream. He has seen and done everything, he is at the “limit of the world” trapped in the East with Eos. The speaker has seen all the beauty the planet has to offer and is now completely alone and miserable.