Summaries of the main poems

‘Mariana’ (1830)

Mariana was originally a character in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, who had been cruelly deserted by her lover Angelo. The epigraph is founded on Shakespeare's ‘There, at the moated grange, resides this dejected Mariana’. The poem is a series of pictures of the grange, the woman, and the country round the grange, making up a powerful evocation of the sadness of the house and of the woman who lives in it. The slight variations in the refrain serve to emphasise the weary monotony, whose force is felt in the marked variation in the last line: 'Oh God, that I were dead!' In the first stanza we approach the grange as observers, noting the details of its desolate state. What is most important, perhaps, is the mingling of mood and object. The device of the formal refrain is as old as poetry, but the prolonged objectification in house and landscape of the woman's desolation was a new note in English poetry.

NOTES

knots: fastenings
Weeded: having weeds growing on it
grange: large country house, or manor
She said, ‘I am: has an unstressed ending which makes the voice seem aweary, aweary' to sob
trance: throw into a trance
casement: window
athwart: across
flats: plains
night-fowl: literally 'night-bird' or 'night-birds,' but 'crow' suggests a cock
fen: marsh, with low fields
stone-cast: stone's throw
sluice: channel for draining water
marsh: marsh
leagues: a league was usually three miles
rounding gray: gray (a sort of distance) which bounds the dreary landscape
up and away: loosed, free to go
their cell: the cave of Aeolus, where in classical mythology the winds were bound
wainscot: wooden panelling on lower part of interior walls
thick-moted: motes are specks of dust
'The Lady of Shalott' (1832, revised 1842)

Like 'Mariana', this poem is strongly pictorial. It is a symbolic tale of a lady condemned by a mysterious curse to weave ceaselessly a magic tapestry. The poem itself has something of the effect of a tapestry, notably in the description of the passers-by in Part II, but it is far from being a piece of sentimental medievalising. Part I shows us the island castle of Shalott, inhabited by the mysterious lady, and the road to Camelot, image of the external world of action. In Part II we move to the lady herself, weaving compulsively under the strange curse, seeing external reality only through the mirror she uses for her weaving, and seeing it as a pageant in which she has no part. In Part III, which takes place in harvest time, the magnificent Sir Lancelot, lover of Queen Guinevere, appears, riding to Camelot, and singing as he goes. The lady leaves her tapestry and looks down to Camelot, and the curse is fulfilled. In Part IV (autumn), the dying lady floats down the river to Camelot, singing her last song. The stanzas continually contrast the active and external Camelot with the contemplative and withdrawn Shalott, except in Part III, where 'Lancelot' replaces 'Camelot' in stanza nine, and 'Shalott' in twelve. The four parts alternate between the external world, and the world of the lady. There is also a division between the contemplative present tenses of I and II, and the active past tenses of III and IV, prefigured by the firstpreterites in the poem in the last stanza of II: 'went', 'came', 'said'.

NOTES

wold: open rolling country, often upland
Camelot: the palace of King Arthur. The Idylls of the King tell of the fall of Camelot from its noble state into dissension, and crime. Here it merely represents the external world
Willows whiten: These trees often grow beside water.
aspens quiver: The white underside of willow leaves shows when the wind blows them; aspens quiver at the least breath of wind
dusk: darken; the water darkens under the breeze
imbowers: embowers, encloses; shelters
shallop: skiff or light craft
bearded barley: barley ears have long bristles
cheerly: cheeringly
web: cloth, here tapestry
churls: men of low degree, or louts
damsels: girls (French demoiselles)
pad: quiet easy-paced horse
greaves: leg armour
A redcross knight: Lancelot's knightly emblem, or arms
blazoned baldric: shoulder strap for the bugle, with his arms blazoned on it
'Tirra lirra': as in Autolycus's song in Shakespeare's The Winter's Tale, IV.2.9
is come: has come
waning: losing strength or size
seer: prophet or visionary
mischance: misfortune
tide: moving water
burgher: rich citizen of a burgh or town
what is here?: what is happening?
cheer: feasting, revelry
‘The Lotos-Eaters’ (1832, extensively revised for 1842)

The main source is Homer’s *Odyssey*, book 9, 82-104. There are two parts: the five narrative Spenserian stanzas, and the irregular Choric Song of the mariners who eat the lotoe fruit, which drugs them into a passive dreamlike state. (The Spenserian stanza was invented by the sixteenth-century poet Edmund Spenser, and used in his unfinished *The Faerie Queene*. The stanza is of nine lines, rhyming ababbcbc; the last line is an Alexandrine, of six iambic feet.) No poem of Tennyson’s is more melodious. The question is often asked, how far he approved of the passive state. He may have been able to indulge his fascination with passivity, knowing that in Homer Odysseus (or Ulysses) forced his drugged mariners back to the ship. But the return is not described in his poem.

Ulysses encourages his weary mariners. They find a strange land, where life moves slowly; even the stream falling from the cliff seems slow. With its waters and shady places, the land seems to welcome them. The sunset seems enchanted, lingering as if unwilling to end; inland are valleys, vales, and meadows; a strange land, ‘where all things always seemed the same’. The Lotos-Eaters, or natives of this land, offer the mariners the lotoe fruit. Tasting it, they drop out of life into a waking dream, in which the everyday sounds of the sea, and of their companions’ voices, are distant and strange. Sitting on the shore, they dream of home, but think with loathing of the sea and the heavy oar, and sing, as if with one voice, ‘We will no longer roam’.

The choric songs of the drugged sailors alternates between the delicious present, and their hateful past of war and the devouring sea. (Ulysses and his men are on their way home to the Greek island of Ithaca, after the ten years’ war at Troy.) In I they sing of the strange music of lotoe-land, which is in their minds and blood. In II they reason on the human condition, advancing the classic paradox of man as the highest being, who lives in torment, and the classic claim that calm is the crown of life. III presents the analogy of growing things happy in their natural cycle: the leaf, the apple which ‘hath no toil’. IV returns to the human condition: they no longer question, but reject, in brief sullen sentences, asking at the end for death, or ‘dreamful ease’. V is the projected dream, now become reality, of peace in lotoe-land: a life of lulled and sweetened senses, and whispered speech, of grateful distant memories of childhood, and the dead. VI follows these memories with a rationalisation of present, and past: surely their families have forgotten them, and Ithaca has been seized. There is nothing they can do about it; ‘there is confusion worse than death’, to men who have endured so much. But (VII) the wonderful dewy freshness of lotoe-land, its many prospects, and luxuriance! The lotoe (VIII) grows everywhere, and will sustain them. No more of the toil and peril of the seas; they will live here like Gods, the Gods who lead their own lives, careless of the suffering of mankind.
### NOTES

**he:** Ulysses, King of Ithaca  
**land . . . land:** a no-rhyme, said by Tennyson to be more lazy than the first reading of 'land . . . strand.'  
**did swoon:** 'swoon' means 'faint'. The construction is periphrastic (using more words than necessary), and archaic. There are several of these periphrases in the first five stanzas, all giving the effect of a slow wondering observation  
**a weary dream:** a nightmare  
**lawn:** finely woven linen  
**Rolling . . . below:** that is, rolling below a slumbrous sheet of foam  
**Upclimb:** climbed up (archaic)  
**down:** grassy open highland or upland, sometimes called downland  
**galingale:** plant or tree with aromatic roots  
**keel:** that is, ship. Unless (as is likely) the ship is beached, when it literally means the keel of the ship  
**rave:** (literally) talk wildly  
**blown:** full-bloomed  
**tired . . . tired:** Tennyson indicated the length of the word as 'tierd', but added 'making the word neither monosyllabic nor dissyllabic, but a dreamy child of the two'  
**make . . . moan:** lament  
**steep:** bathe, soak  
**waxing:** growing or increasing  
**Fast-rooted:** firmly rooted  
**Vaulted:** arched like a roof  
**parcels:** pieces  
**myrrh:** aromatic plant  
**crisping:** curling  
**urn:** that is, urn in which the ashes of the dead were placed  
**Our sons inherit:** a recurrent theme in Tennyson: section 90 (XC) of In Memoriam, and 'Enoch Arden'  
**the little isle:** that is, Ithaca  
**amaranth:** legendary unfading flower  
**moly:** fabulous herb with magic properties  
**lowly:** softly (unusual as an adverb in this sense)  
**acanthus:** plant, whose leaf form was much used in Greek architecture as an ornamental pattern  
**blows:** blooms  
**starboard, larboard:** right and left side of vessel looking forward  
**with an equal mind:** calmly and firmly  
**nectar:** the drink of the gods  
**bolts:** thunderbolts, or lightning flashes, the weapons of the gods  
**Blight:** malignant influence  
**cleave:** cut (that is, plough)  
**Elysian:** Elysium was the abode of the blessed after death  
**asphodel:** immortal flower in Elysium

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'Ulysses' (1842)

This dramatic monologue was written in October 1833, soon after Tennyson heard of Hallam's death. He said of it: 'it gives the feeling about the need of going forward and braving the struggle of life perhaps more simply than anything in In Memoriam'. Ulysses, or Odysseus, who appears briefly in 'The Lotos-Eaters', was one of the Greek kings who besieged and took Troy; his long wanderings and homecoming are told in the Odyssey of Homer. Another last voyage for Ulysses occurs in 'The Divine Comedy' of Dante (1265-I321), (Inferno, 26, 90ff.). Tennyson makes him an old man bored with his island kingdom, and desiring one more voyage of adventure before death. The first and third of the four paragraphs are short, the second and fourth long. In the fourth paragraph he addresses his old companions. It is generally supposed that paragraph three is also spoken aloud, although it gains something if regarded as internal monologue. ‘Ulysses’ is capable of several interpretations; there has been a long critical debate about whether he is heroic, or less than heroic, in leaving his subjects and his aged wife.

(1-5) Ulysses speaks of his inaction on Ithaca, with his wife Penelope, among his brutish subjects. (6-32) He speaks of his love of life, of his great name, of all that he has seen and known, and of how there is always something more to be experienced. Life must be used; it would be unmanly to spare himself in old age, while longing to follow knowledge beyond its human limits. (33-43) His son Telemachus will take his place, and will instruct and civilise the Ithacans. Unlike Ulysses, his talents are civil, and domestic: 'He works his work, I mine'. (44-70) The ship is ready. Ulysses turns to his old companions who will accompany him, and recalls what they have known together. Old though they are, they may yet accomplish one more heroic deed. The deep seas call them; they will sail west into unknown waters, perhaps to see the great hero Achilles, 'whom we knew'. They are not the men they were, but accept their fate, knowing that their hearts are great.

NOTES

still hearth: in part an image of a dead fire, but also that of a house without children
an aged wife: Penelope, who had remained faithful during his long absence: It is his only mention of her mete and dole: measure out carefully: 'dole' suggests small quantities, and the phrase strongly suggests day-to-day dullness Unequal laws: laws made for a primitive race, in that their weight varies among different classes of society lees: the dregs of wine scudding drifts: to scud is to move quickly; drifts are broken clouds Hyades: stars whose rising predicted storm ringing: probably ringing with the sounds of battle arch: this image has been much discussed; it probably suggests a rainbow, although it has been compared to the experience of entering and exiting a railway tunnel Gleams: a word of particular meaning in Tennyson, suggesting a light which is to be followed of me: (archaic) by me discerning to: clear-sighted enough to be able to rugged: rough, strong. Notice that 'the savage race' of 1.4 is now only 'a rugged people', as Ulysses leaves the Ithacans to his son blameless: a high attribute in a heroic age, and indeed in any age in which men know that evil exists sphere: path (the sphere of a planet was its appointed track in the heavens) decent: knowing what is fitting (compare the structure of 'discerning to fulfil' in 1.35) household gods: gods of the hearth and home
**Tennyson**

| **wrought:** | worked. Note the rhyme of 'thought,' which follows 'wrought' with the suddenness of a new understanding of what he had in common with his companions; the difference from his attitude to Telemachus is marked, although there is no contempt towards him |
| **frolic:** | playful |
| **Not unbecoming:** | the understatement of the double negative is appropriate to such persuasion |
| **sitting well in:** | that is, at the oars. Vessels of the heroic age were rowed by the warriors, sometimes with the king as helmsman; the galleys of a later age were rowed by slaves |
| **gulfs:** | the deeps of the sea, or perhaps the abysses believed to lie beyond the ocean that circled the world |
| **wash:** | (of a moving liquid) carry along. This line is entirely monosyllabic, like several others in the last sentence |
| **touch:** | idiomatic: for example, 'the ship touched at several ports'. Tennyson brilliantly combines this with a sense of the hesitation before the impossible |
| **the Happy Isles:** | the Isles of the Blessed, believed to lie in the western ocean |
| **abides:** | remains |
| **To strive . . .:** | that this line has the same cadence as the fifth line is |
| **not to yield** | probably significant |
'Break, break, break' (1842)

This short lyric was probably written in 1834. It was inspired by the death of Hallam. No summary is necessary, or indeed possible, although it should be noted that the eye moves from the breaking waves to the children on the shore, then from the young sailor in his boat on the bay to the ships farther out, then back to the sea breaking on the stones. The movement is circular, and the poem ends with the despair and inability to understand with which it began. The rhythm is anapaestic: Anapaests are usually associated with lightness and speed; Tennyson's anapaests here are very slow. Apart from the remorseless and hopeless breaking of the sea on the rocks, the poem seems content with observation in place of imagery. This is probably its essential meaning: the world is meaningless.

NOTES

O well for: in a double sense: that is, it is well for him, but not for me; and also it is well for him, since he does not know what the future will bring. The phrase is ironic.

stately: the power of this adjective in its context is that the ships, though stately and dignified, are vulnerable. Wordsworth has a comparable effect in his sonnet 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge', where he speaks of the great sleeping city as a sight 'touching in its majesty'.

haven: harbour
'Come down, O maid, from yonder mountain height' (from The Princess (1847))

This is one of the two lyrics from the last section of ‘The Princess’. In this section Princess Ida, who has rejected men because of their assumption of superiority over women, finally accepts the love of the Prince. The Prince's belief is that man must gain in sweetness, woman in 'mental breadth,' until at last woman will 'set herself to man, / Like perfect music unto noble words'. The other song in this section is ‘Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white,’ which is a variation on the Persian ghazal form. The lyrics within the verse of ‘The Princess’ - ‘Tears, idle tears’, ‘O Swallow, Swallow’, ‘Our enemies have fallen’, and the two already referred to - should not be confused with the six intercalary (inserted) songs between the seven sections, which Tennyson added in 1850. Ida reads this song or 'small sweet idyl' as she sits by the bed of the Prince, who has persisted in his wooing of her, and is now recovering from wounds received at a tournament between his supporters and Ida's. The lyric is a classic example of the seduction song, like 'To His Coy Mistress' by Andrew Marvell (1621-78). The shepherd, who is a type or figure of the pastoral lover, begs the virgin to leave the cold and sterile heights of virginity, where nothing that is human can be found. He asks her to come down to the warm human valley, where Love lives with contentment, and to follow the falling stream to the hearth and home that await her. On the icy mountains the only sound is the yelping of the savage eagles, but in the valley every sound is sweet. The poem ends with three lines of extraordinary onomatopoeia invoking the characteristic sounds of the sheltered valley. This rich onomatopoeia, or imitation of sound, is an appropriate conclusion: the virgin is being called back to that richness of life that she seems to have abandoned. Notice that from the beginning the shepherd assumes, perhaps as a stratagem, that she is looking for love.

NOTES:

- **glide a sunbeam:** that is, like a sunbeam
- **the blasted Pine:** withered, blighted pine tree. The pine is common in northern latitudes, and is able to grow at great heights. Here its state symbolises the sterility of the mountains
- **spire:** tapering structure, or tower: here 'peak'
- **threshold:** symbolising the house, with its frequent comings and goings
- **spirited purple of the vats:** grape juice splashing as it is trodden
- **foolike in the vine:** the reference is to the Bible, Song of Solomon 2: 15: ‘Take us the foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vines; for our vines have tender grapes'
- **silver horns:** the white snowy peaks, here made emblematic.
  There is probably a reference to the crescent moon of Diana, goddess of virginity, hunting, and the moon
- **furrows:** that is, glaciers; usually arms of the sea, or estuaries, as in the Epilogue of In Memoriam
- **furrow-cloven:** split by deep wrinkles, or hollows
- **to roll the torrent:** that is, the cold streams from the ice
- **dance thee down:** the virgin is to follow the dancing waters on their way down to make the valley fruitful
- **water-smoke:** see 'The Lotos-Eaters', l.10
- **like a broken purpose** the simile refers directly to the waste of nature’s purposes in virginity. It is an old argument
‘Maud’ (1855) Part XXII

An expression of the narrator's ecstasy as he waits for Maud in her garden. This is the last section of Part 1, and is followed by the catastrophe of the fatal duel with her brother, and their separation, in Part II. The verse and stanza forms throughout are regular, with some interesting variations. The falling or trochaic measure characteristic of the monodrama is reversed to a rapid anapaestic. Ruskin drew attention to Tennyson's mastery of the verse forms, showing that not one line is exactly similar to another in its prosody. The rose and the lily are at the heart of the dominant flower imagery. These classic images of passion and purity which mingle here occur elsewhere in 'Maud' though the common critical belief that the symbols have more weight than the action is unfounded; the symbolism of Maud is not complex. The rhythm also evokes the music of the ballroom. The poem was set to music by Balfe, and out of its context became a popular drawing-room song. The reversal of the movement in the last stanza, discussed in Part 3, is perhaps the most brilliant effect of the poem.

NOTES

the planet of Love: the morning star Venus, or Phosphorus
faint: as the light of the sun grows; the metaphor of lines 9-12 is sexual
half: that is, half of the departing guests
young lord-lover: Maud's official wooer; he can now afford to speak of him without rancour
clashed: usually suggests a harsh discordant noise; here it probably signifies a contrast between the garden of growing things, and the loud noise from the ballroom. Note `hall', not `Hall'; that is, the ballroom, not the house
Our wood: the wood near his house, where he walks with Maud
would not shake: because there had been no breeze
start: make a sudden involuntary movement
purple and red: imperial colours of triumph; also suggesting blood