

E-material for Semester VI English Program , DSE 3

**TITLE : Literature and Philosophical Thoughts**

**Unit II : Crossing the Bar, Alfred Lord Tennyson**

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**Crossing the Bar**

ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

Sunset and evening star,

And one clear call for me!

And may there be no moaning of the bar,

When I put out to sea,

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,

Too full for sound and foam,

When that which drew from out the boundless deep

Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,

And after that the dark!

And may there be no sadness of farewell,

When I embark;

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place  
The flood may bear me far,  
I hope to see my Pilot face to face  
When I have crost the bar.

#### ABOUT THE POET:

**Alfred Lord Tennyson**

**(1809–1892)**

Born on August 6, 1809, in Somersby, Lincolnshire, England, Alfred Lord Tennyson is one of the most well-loved Victorian poets. Tennyson, the fourth of twelve children, showed an early talent for writing. At the age of twelve he wrote a 6,000-line epic poem. His father, the Reverend George Tennyson, tutored his sons in classical and modern languages. In the 1820s, however, Tennyson's father began to suffer frequent mental breakdowns that were exacerbated by alcoholism. One of Tennyson's brothers had violent quarrels with his father, a second was later confined to an insane asylum, and another became an opium addict.

Tennyson escaped home in 1827 to attend Trinity College, Cambridge. In that same year, he and his brother Charles published *Poems by Two Brothers*. Although the poems in the book were mostly juvenilia, they attracted the attention of the "Apostles," an undergraduate literary club led by Arthur Hallam. The "Apostles" provided Tennyson, who was tremendously shy, with much needed friendship and confidence as a poet. Hallam and Tennyson became the best of friends; they toured Europe together in 1830 and again in 1832. Hallam's sudden death in 1833 greatly affected the young poet. The long elegy *In Memoriam* and many of Tennyson's other poems are tributes to Hallam.

In 1830, Tennyson published *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* and in 1832 he published a second volume entitled simply *Poems*. Some reviewers condemned these books as "affected" and "obscure." Tennyson, stung by the reviews, would not publish another book for nine years. In 1836, he became engaged to Emily Sellwood. When he lost his inheritance on a bad investment in 1840, Sellwood's family called off the engagement. In 1842, however, Tennyson's *Poems* in two volumes was a tremendous critical and popular success. In 1850, with the publication of *In Memoriam*, Tennyson became one of Britain's most popular poets. He was selected Poet Laureate in succession to Wordsworth. In that same year, he married Emily Sellwood. They had two sons, Hallam and Lionel.

At the age of 41, Tennyson had established himself as the most popular poet of the Victorian era. The money from his poetry (at times exceeding 10,000 pounds per year) allowed him to purchase a house in the country and to write in relative seclusion. His appearance—a large and bearded man, he regularly wore a cloak and a broad brimmed hat—enhanced his notoriety. He read his poetry with a booming voice, often compared to that of Dylan Thomas. In 1859, Tennyson published the first poems of *Idylls of the Kings*, which sold more than 10,000 copies in one month. In 1884, he accepted a peerage, becoming Alfred Lord Tennyson. Tennyson died on October 6, 1892, and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

#### ABOUT THE POEM :

'Crossing the Bar', an elegy written by the British poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson, is a poem focusing on the transience of life and the finality of death. The poem was written in 1889 when the poet was visiting the Isle of Wight and published in a volume *Demeter and Other Poems* (1889). He was eighty years old at the time and was down with a severe illness, from which he eventually recovered. The illness, however, made the poet ponder on Death as he himself was very old and nearing his time. He uses the metaphor of crossing a sand bar to represent death in this poem. The poem consists of four stanzas, and each of them are quatrains. The poet uses the classical rhyme scheme of *abab*.

#### EXPLANATION:

First stanza:

"Sunset and evening star,

And one clear call for me!"

The poem begins with the speaker describing the atmosphere. He says it is sunset and the evening star can be seen in the sky. Someone is calling the speaker. It is a clear, unmistakable call. It is the call of death. The speaker believes that his death is close. It is interesting to note here the imagery the poet presents before us at the start of the poem. 'Sunset' and 'Evening star' represent the end of the day. Just as the day is about to end, the speaker says that his life is drawing to an end as well.

"And may there be no moaning of the bar,

When I put out to sea,"

Here the poet uses his famous metaphor of 'Crossing the bar', describing death as an act of passing beyond life. The word 'bar' here means a sandbar. A sandbar is a geographical structure which forms around the mouth of a river, or extends from a 'Spit' by slow deposition of sediments carried by the current over millions of years. The structure forms a kind of barrier between the water inside (the river water) and outside it (the open sea). The poet uses this sandbar as a symbol of death, with the water inside representing his life, and the water beyond representing the afterlife. He wants to 'put out to sea' without the 'moaning of the bar'. The poet wishes his death to be without pain and without mourning.

Second stanza:

"But such a tide as moving seems asleep,

Too full for sound and foam,"

Through the poem, the poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson compares his impending death to crossing a bar. In the stanza, the speaker of the poem talks about the inevitability of death. The poet wishes that when he 'put(s) out to sea', that is when he dies, let it be like a ride which seems asleep as it moves. The speaker wants his death to be smooth. Like a calm sea wave, which is 'too full for sound and foam' the speaker hopes that his death will be silent, smooth and quick, making no fuss.

"When that which drew from out the boundless deep

Turns again home."

In the subsequent lines, the poet uses the example of the river and the sea to express the kind of death he wishes for himself. The water from the sea evaporates and turns into clouds; these clouds bring rain, entering that water into the river, and these rivers too flow, carrying their water and eventually pouring it into the sea. They, thus complete a cycle, and the water returns from where it came. Just so, the speaker, considering himself like the water, says that he is returning where he came from. 'The boundless deep' here apparently stands for the sea, and in an allegorical sense to the place the poet believes he will go to after his death. Here, we should notice that this stanza is a strict continuation of the idea introduced in the first stanza. The last lines of the first stanza together with this one makes up the meaning of the verse.

Third Stanza:

"Twilight and evening bell,

And after that the dark!"

In the third stanza, the poet again resorts to describing the atmosphere to convey his inner feelings. It was sunset when the speaker started the poem, but now it is twilight. The sun has already gone down the horizon and dusk is settling. The speaker can hear the evening bell tolling. It is the indication that night is approaching. Then after a while it gets dark. It is night. The poet here uses twilight to show us the state of his life. Just as the day has ended, his life too is about to end. Here twilight stands for sadness, darkness and grief portray the speaker's miserable state before his death.

"And may there be no sadness of farewell,

When I embark;"

The speaker expresses his hope that there will be no 'sadness of farewell' upon his death. The 'sadness of farewell' is ambiguous and can mean both the speaker's own sadness as he departs from life, or the sadness of the people whom he leaves behind and who are saying farewell to him. However, we think, the former is more relevant. Again, Lord Tennyson writes 'When I embark' to convey the idea of the speaker's death. Thus, it is evident from the word 'embark' that death is not seen as a final destination by the poet, but rather as a new beginning.

Fourth stanza:

"For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place

The flood may bear me far,"

In the previous stanza of the poem, we see the speaker's positive attitude towards death. It is seen to be exemplified in this final stanza of the poem. We understand that the speaker has accepted his reality – inevitability of death. He appears to have made his peace with the idea of his fast approaching death. He says that he will be beyond the boundaries of time and place and the flood of death will carry him far away. This is going beyond the reach of this world. The speaker suggests that there is a place beyond our time and space where he hopes to go after his death. We are, thus, acquainted with the poet's belief in afterlife.

"I hope to see my Pilot face to face

When I have crost the bar."

These final lines of the poem are shrouded in allusions and hidden meanings. Firstly, we are told that the speaker hopes to see his pilot face to face when he will have crossed the bar. Here, the word pilot is a direct reference to God. Lord Tennyson had peculiar views on religion. On one hand, he disapproved of Christianity, while on the other, we see wide use of religious things and ideas in his works. Since God is considered to drive the world and all living things, we see the pilot reference of the divine world in the poem. Also, the use of the word 'crost' is interesting. While it might simply be a word to suggest 'Crossing' the bar, it is speculated that it might be a reference to Christ, as crost is similar in sound to both Christ and Cross. If so, then we find another allusion from the poet to religion and afterlife.

The poem thus ends on a positive note with the poet both accepting the finality of death and hoping to meet God in the afterlife.

References:

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