

# Regret in tennynson's the lotos-eaters



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Tennyson's *The Lotos-Eaters* is a poem which can be interpreted as having several meanings. While it can be understood as a lament for masculinity in peril, it can also be interpreted as expressing regret for the mariners' indulgence in forbidden pleasures. Tennyson shows this in a number of different ways, the first being the vocabulary used in the poem before and after the actual ingestion of the lotus flowers; the mariners' admiration of the island's beauty provides an effective contrast to their disconnection from it, and everything else, once they have eaten the lotus. Another device which underlines this point is Tennyson's drawing of parallels between the effects of the lotus, the topography of the island itself, and the state of the men, connecting them in such a way that one echoes another. This establishes a feeling of sameness which pervades the poem, and mimics the effects of the lotus on the mariners, highlighting all which has been lost by the mariners who chose to eat it.

From the first stanza, Tennyson uses pleasant words to extol the beauty of the island, and portray it as a desirable place to stay. Words such as "languid" (Tennyson line 5), "slender" (8) and "afternoon" (3) all carry pleasant connotations, and Tennyson's repetition of certain phrases, such as "like a downward smoke" (8, 10) underlines how ethereal and picturesque the streams seem. Even the sound of the stream is subconsciously evoked by the sibilance of the repeated 's' words in "...smoke, the slender stream" (8). This positive characterization carries on into the second stanza, too; a river is described as "gleaming" (14), and the mountain-tops as "sunset-flush'd" (17). These idyllic terms represent the allure of the island before the mariners partake of the lotus, and will be contrasted with harsher language

in later stanzas, the comparison highlighting what the mariners have lost. The use of the word " charmed" (19) to describe the sunset is very telling, too, in that it has associations with magic and spells; in one sense, Tennyson is saying that the sunset is something which the mariners had the good fortune to see, but in another, he foreshadows the effects the lotus will have on them. This connection is made stronger by the use of the words " enchanted stem" (28) to describe the lotus itself later in the poem.

Once the island's inhabitants, the " Lotos-eaters" (27), give the lotus to the mariners, the language employed by Tennyson suddenly changes. Instead of words with positive meanings and connotations, he starts using alienating and isolating words. The waves " mourn and rave" (32), suggesting that the sea itself is sad and angry with the men. Not only that, but it does so " on alien shores" (33), showing just how far away the men are from their previous life at sea and even their current location. The men's perspective on the sea is also revealed to have changed; not only is it " far, far away" (32) but it is also " barren foam" (42), again emphasising how much the men have lost to the lotus. The distance between the men themselves is also shown to be great, as when they speak their voices sound like they're coming " from the grave" (34). In the final stanza, what the men have given up is brought into sharp relief; it is made clear that they now only " dream of [their] Fatherland" (39), showing that the idea of home is no longer a reality to them. Even their slaves are thought of fondly, and included in their nostalgia, in the phrase " child, and wife, and slave" (40). Separated from their companions, their surroundings, and their hope, the mariners have

given up everything for constancy of the lotus's effects and have relegated themselves simply to dreams.

Constancy is also a very important through-line of the poem, with Tennyson describing the island as unchanging, chronologically. The mariners land on the island "in the afternoon" (3) and subsequently it is described as a place in which "it seemed always afternoon" (4). This immediately sets up the idea that this is a land which does not change, and whose beauty is both breathtaking and constant. Indeed, the sun and the moon are both out at once, confusing even the most basic measure of time. The sunset is said to have "linger'd" (19) and the island itself is directly said to be "a land where all things always seem'd the same" (24). The constancy is also highlighted by the extremely regular rhyme scheme of the poem, which does not deviate at any point from the pattern established in the first stanza. A more interesting picture still is painted by the meter of the poem; it is mostly in iambic pentameter, although the last line of every stanza is in hexameter, setting up a regular rhythm. Additionally, once the mariners have actually taken the lotus, the meter becomes much more regular, with ten syllables in every line except the last one of each stanza, which naturally has twelve, being in hexameter. The reason that these features are important is that monotonous, unyielding regularity is all the lotus has to offer, and it is that for which the mariners have given up the good and bad of their normal lives; the forbidden pleasures in which they have engaged have denied everything but sameness to them.

Another way in which this sameness is described is by conflating the features of the island with the effects of the lotus, in effect saying that the island, the

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lotus and those who take it are all the same. The word "seem" appears many times throughout the poem, describing the landscape, the men and the effects of the lotus on them, and this serves to unify them in a state of flux. The land itself "seemed always afternoon" (4), the sea "seem[ed] to mourn and rave" (32) and the men themselves are describes as "deep-asleep he seem'd" (35). Tennyson increases this effect in the rhyming couplets at the end of each stanza, each of which contains a comparison of two opposing ideas. In the first stanza, the stream appeared to "fall and pause and fall" (9); in the second, the "sunset-flush'd" (17) mountains are juxtaposed with the "shadowy pine" (18); in the third, the lotus-eaters' faces are described as both "pale" (26) and "dark" (26); in the fourth, the men seem "deep-asleep" (35) and "all awake" (35), and in the fifth, the crux of the poem emerges, namely the contrast between "home" (44) and "roam" (45). The effect this has on the reader is to show how even disparate ideas are the same on this island, and under the effects of the lotus, again underlining how the men have sacrificed variety in favor of predictability.

Even the landscape, the main thrust of the poem for the first three stanzas, is completely forgotten once the men take the lotus. Instead of being characterized as beautiful or breathtaking, the island is now simply the place where the mariners will stay because they are too apathetic to go elsewhere; all of the aesthetic appeal of the island is irrelevant. It is arguable that the beauty of the island as it is described in the first three stanzas is actually the beauty of discovery and of novelty, which is lost to the mariners once they submit themselves to the sameness of the lotus, again showing the consequences of indulging in forbidden pleasures. The only thing which is

characterized consistently throughout the poem is the sea (in other words, the only thing mentioned in the poem which is not directly related to the island); the foam is said to be "slumbrous" (13), and the sea "weary" (41).

The many poetic techniques used by Tennyson in this poem cumulatively serve to show the reader that the indulgence of the mariners has prevented them from achieving anything. The lotus provides stability, but as a consequence the mariners no longer want to explore, or discover. They simply want to sit on the shore and dream of their homes, rather than attempting to get back to their wives and children, and it is in this way that Tennyson expresses regret for forbidden pleasures; there is an implied value in traveling and discovery, and as shown by the lack of mention of the beautiful landscape towards the end of the poem, even the most stunning aesthetics eventually become commonplace and unworthy of mention. Ultimately, Tennyson shows that not only have the men lost their future, but they have also lost the present; they are unable to appreciate their surroundings, the beauty being the only saving grace of the island.