

Compare the
atmosphere between
the prisoner of chillon
and morte d'arthur



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In Tennyson's "Morte d'Arthur" and Byron's "The Prisoner of Chillon" the dominant atmosphere is one of depression, darkness and despair.

This mood is achieved through both poets use of setting, portraying the characters' feelings, creation of pathos and moments of contrasting atmosphere. "Morte d'Arthur" has as its subject King Arthur's progressive deterioration and preparation for his death with the help of Sir Bedivere. "The Prisoner of Chillon" focuses on the four years of confinement that Francois de Bonivard, a political activist, endured as well as witnessing the death of his two brothers while in prison. From these two poems, the theme of death stands out as it is frequently mentioned and both poets use similar techniques to create this melancholic atmosphere.

Despite the fact that one poem is set mainly indoors and the other out in the open, the atmosphere is quite similar in both poems and this is achieved by use of setting. Byron's "The Prisoner of Chillon" takes place in the dungeons of a castle. From the opening of the poem, we learn how terrible the living conditions were for Francois, as the dungeons described as "deep and old", "massy and grey", making the atmosphere seem very grim, morose and depressing. Byron emphasises on this dark and gloomy atmosphere by describing an "imprisoned ray", suggesting that even light wanted to escape. "Morte d'Arthur" on the other hand, has a contrasting setting as it takes place outside in an abandoned churchyard where Arthur and Bedivere end up due to the battle of Lyonesse.

Nevertheless, Tennyson achieves a similar atmosphere of darkness and gloom through uses of natural imagery. Arthur's strength was failing him "

because his wound was deep” and he knew that he did not have much time left, and this contributes to the atmosphere of the poem. The poet describes where the preparation for his death takes place: “ among the mountains by the winter sea”, the word “ winter” giving the reader the impression of a cold and desolate place. Tennyson shows a sense of pathos by describing the area where Arthur and Bedivere are as a “ dark straight of barren land”, implying that the place had been uninhabited for a long period of time. This adds to the overall sense of pathos because it shows Arthur and Bedivere being very much alone. This poem claws upon the reader’s emotions heavily, and enforces a feeling of overwhelming pity for the pair as Bedivere aids Arthur to where he was to meet his death as they encounter difficulties along the way, such as Arthur’s failing strength and the urgent tone in his voice when saying “ Quick, quick! I fear it is too late and I shall die”.

Assonance and alliteration are used to effect throughout this poem, and the language formally reproduces the feeling described. As Bedivere carries Arthur to the lake, his difficult progress is aptly suggested by the language. Dry clash’d”, “ barren chasms”, “ bare black cliff clang’d around him”, “ slippery crag” and “ sharp - smitten”, the words here are mainly monosyllabic; the diction is concrete, measured and precise; the alliterative effects of such groupings as clash’d - chasms - cliff - clang’d - crag are suggestive of harshness and the difficulties Bedivere encounters. The description is not only visual but aural; the reader may hear the clash of armour among the echoing cliffs and the ringing of his heels on the crags.

In a similar way, Byron’s poetic work tells the struggle between a person’s ending their suffering and accepting it rather than holding onto the hope of
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freedom. The narrator says: " we were seven - now we are one", and this adds to the sense of pathos because it emphasises on how difficult it was for the prisoner to cope after his brothers had passed away, leaving him to endure the loneliness, with " no strength to stir, or strive" - as he had nothing left, his family was all gone and he was the one " bound to my [his] failing race". Both poets emphasise on the characters feelings in both poems, especially on the feeling on loneliness. In " Morte d'Arthur", the death of Arthur indicates not only the death of an old order and the dissolution of the Round Table, but also the desolation of Sir Bedivere who still cannot this order: " Ah! my Lord Arthur, whither shall I go? " he cries, " For now I see the true old times are dead"; he, the last of Arthurs's knights must " go forth companionless".

Arthur instructs Bedivere to throw into the lake the sword Excalibur; Excalibur, he believes, will be an essential part of the story and its origins known " wheresoever I am sung or told/ In aftertime". When Bedivere first tries to throw away the sword, he fails because he is dazzled by its beauty; he sees it as a valuable aesthetic object. Arthur is angered not so much because he fails to throw the sword as because he lies:" Thou has betrayed thy nature and thy name"; he has not acted as befits a noble knight and therefore has undermined all the ideals represented by the Round Table. The second time Bedivere fails because he convinces himself that the king " knows not what he does" and so should not be obeyed; he now sees the sword as a sign, something that should be kept as a " record" or " relic" of Arthur in order that the story should not be forgotten. Similarly, Byron also emphasises on the feeling of loneliness in " The Prisoner of Chillon".

The death of Francois' brothers affect him so much that at one point he was left with " no thought, no feeling", showing how difficult it was for him to cope being all alone in the dungeon. The complete sense of emptiness he feels is described as " blank, and bleak, and grey", the colours Byron uses to describe the prisoner's feelings are a joyless and mournful colours. There are several contrasting moods in both poems but that contributes to emphasising the atmosphere. From the beginning of " The Prisoner of Chillon", the reader gets the impression of a very morose and depressing poem, which is the dominant mood throughout the poem until suddenly " a light broke in upon my [his] brain" - this sudden change in atmosphere contrasts deeply to the poem, as it is implied that darkness dominates the atmosphere and then unexpectedly light appears. The contrasting mood does further when Francois notices a bird outside the window.

The bird is described as a " lovely bird, with azure wings", the use of colour to describe the bird also goes against the dark atmosphere of the poem as this is the first time colour has been mentioned and for a brief moment, it makes the poem sound more joyous as death and darkness is not mentioned for a while. However, that feeling is short-lived as the bird eventually flies away and the sorrowful mood dominates the joyous atmosphere. A similar effect takes place in " Morte d'Arthur", as in the opening of the poem the surrounding is bleak and empty and the atmosphere is one of sadness and woe. However, when Bedivere finally succeeds in throwing the sword into the lake, the whole atmosphere changes because an arm " clothed in white samite, mystic and wonderful" receives the sword and this description of light contradicts against the feeling of death.

So to conclude, the atmosphere created in both poems is from the use of many techniques such as exploring the characters feelings and contrasting settings. Tennyson, for example, begins his poem in a mournful tone and ends with the atmosphere being saddening but slightly cheerful at the same time. Both poems have references to birds, in Byron's poem it refers to "young eagles, being free", comparing the prisoner to the bird because unlike the prisoner, the bird has freedom whereas the prisoner does not.