Life Is More Than Living

In “Tithonus”, Tennyson explores the concepts of mortality and humanity. Tennyson’s take on the Greek and Roman myth focuses on the perspective of his title character, Tithonus. While not completely disputing previous portrayals, Tennyson’s interpretation gives more attention to Tithonus as a man struggling to adapt to his place in the world after realizing that his once forsaken mortality was a gift that he can never again have. Tennyson’s style for this poem accentuates the internal turmoil faced by Tithonus and creates a tone that imparts a desperation for his audience to appreciate the life they are given. With “Tithonus”, Tennyson creates a story that enriches a tale from an untold perspective.

Tennyson's poetic style in "Tithonus" consists of seven stanzas, all with a different number of lines - in order, 10, 21, 11, 3, 4, 14, 13 – and all seven stanzas are written in blank verse with iambic pentameter. Tennyson's lack of a blatant or consistent rhyme scheme suggests a desire for "Tithonus" to be appreciated for the story that it tells, and potentially less for its poetic diction; this perspective is aided by the poem’s accessible language. Though the imagery created is complex and thorough, the words used are not overly elaborate or lengthy. However, with the poem being written in iambic pentameter, there is also an obvious effort to give his work poetic form. His use of a consistent meter and stress pattern combined with the lack of a rhyming pattern provides what could be considered a very intentional balance for "Tithonus".

Tithonus' plight is that he is naturally a mortal living under immortal conditions. Both his mortality and flawed immortality are represented through Tennyson’s poetic style - His mundane
mortality through an avoidance of a blatant rhyme scheme, and his flawed immortality through the iambic pentameter that persists throughout the poem, however without consistency. Though these contrasts give the poem balance, they display the imbalance that Tithonus feels as an immortal being with mortal flaws. Tennyson writes from the perspective of Tithonus being a desperate man. Tithonus is the speaker of the poem addressing Aurora (the Roman goddess of the dawn) - his lover, deity, and captor. The style in which this poem is written organizes the experience of a pitiable man struggling with a chaotic circumstance.

This poem also differs from previous versions of Tithonus' plight in several ways. In addition to focusing on the perspective of its title character (a stark contrast from the Homeric Hymn, "Hymn to Aphrodite"), in Tennyson’s poem it is Tithonus who requests his immortality, not Aurora. Tithonus is so enamored with his beauty and Aurora choosing him that he sees himself as "none other than a god" (14). With this sentiment, Tithonus is spurred towards requesting that Aurora grant him immortality. In other tellings, it is Zeus who grants Tithonus immortality at the behest of Aurora. The effect of this change is that Aurora is not a goddess so consumed with her infatuation that she doesn't think to phrase her request carefully; instead, she is a being with enormous power that gives "Like wealthy men, who care not how they give" (17). Aurora is incapable of human perspective, and has bestowed upon Tithonus a "gift" that, in his opinion, has "beat me down and marr'd and wasted me" (19). In Tennyson’s telling, Aurora is an extremely powerful being who trifled with the life of a mere mortal. Her objective was to see her desires fulfilled without any real concern for the consequences her lover would face.

While the original myth, like many other myths, seemed to focus on how disconnected the gods were from the ways of mortals, this poem demonstrates the dangers of mortals hungering for immortality. Tithonus is so distraught that he pleads with Aurora to return his
mortality. Despite her understanding and weeping for his suffering, she only offers that "The Gods themselves cannot recall their gifts" (49). Tithonus is overwhelmed with emotion. He sees death in all the world around him and envies the men that are allowed to rest beneath the earth they once tilled (3). Tithonus hungered for mortality, and now his plight is more severe because he abandoned what he now desires, a mortal life; he asked for the suffering he now endures.

From “Tithonus”, Tennyson’s point of view is that mortal beings are lucky to experience death. In his opinion, those who know the eventuality of death have better, maybe even happier lives. For Tithonus - from his home just outside the breadth of humanity - he can see the steam that “Floats up from those dim fields about the homes / Of happy men that have the power to die, / And grassy barrows of the happier dead” (69-71). In the Homeric Hymns’ version of this story, an appreciation for mortality is not explored. Yes, its version of Tithonus begrudges his circumstance, but not because of his appreciation for mortality; he only mourns that he must suffer through a tainted immortality. It could be reasoned that Tennyson’s Tithonus also would not have gained an appreciation for mortality if his immortality came with eternal youth. However, the fact that Tennyson steers Tithonus towards enlightenment during his time of distress gives insight to Tennyson’s feelings. He believes that a focus on Tithonus’ perspective would conclude in his evolving to realize that he made himself a part of a world in which he did not belong. Tithonus’ regret would not be in a failure to find the right words, but in forsaking the gift of mortality.

Another facet that separates this work is that Tennyson’s Tithonus desires to be freed from Aurora’s dwelling, as their natures are too divergent (64-5). He expresses this desire while also asking for mortality and death. He observes how he used to watch Aurora bring the dawn: “In days far-off, and with what other eyes / I used to watch—if I be he that watch'd— / The lucid
outline forming round thee; saw / The dim curls kindle into sunny rings” (51-4). However, now her presence just illuminates his suffering as he says to her “Coldly thy rosy shadows bathe me, cold / Are all thy lights, and cold my wrinkled feet / Upon thy glimmering thresholds”(66-8). In the Homeric Hymn, Aurora’s visits nourish her cherished Tithonus; Tennyson’s Tithonus is pained by her presence. Her regret over the suffering she’s caused Tithonus does not keep her at his side. As a goddess devoid of humanity, her solution is to lock away her mistake. Tennyson’s Tithonus is so pained that he wishes to deny immortality. He wants to die so that his body may return to the earth. He wants to forget his woeful experience of feeling alone, and he wants to forget the unnatural cold he feels when Aurora brings natural warmth for everyone else (76-7).

Tennyson’s "Tithonus" also strays from other works in how it deals with the moral the myth imparts. In the Homeric Hymns, the moral is a mixture of "be careful what you wish for" and "immortality is a fate better suited for gods". While these themes are definitely present in "Tithonus", what Tennyson wants to impart to his audience is a bit more layered. As Tithonus addresses Aurora, Tennyson addresses his reader. In this way, Tennyson uses Tithonus as a vehicle to address the human dilemma of mortality, or more broadly, the core of humanity.

Before Tithonus is granted immortality, he is obsessed with two things: his beauty and Aurora. He describes himself before immortality as “So glorious in his beauty and thy choice, / Who madest him thy chosen, that he seem’d / To his great heart none other than a God” (12-14). This drives him to disregard the very nature of humanity. Many would argue that human life ascribes its value to its temporality. Life is only precious because it can be lost. This is why Tennyson opens his poem with “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” (1-4); the concept of the living transitioning in a natural manner sets the
tone for his perspective. This aspect of humanity is so evident that many have written of gods and immortals envying and cherishing humans for this trait. However, as would be expected from a mortal being, many humans fear death and given the opportunity, would circumvent this part of their humanity. As Tithonus discards his humanity, he is afforded the ability to examine the philosophy of his current state through the eyes of an immortal. Without the human burden of fearing his eventual demise he muses "Why should a man desire in any way / To vary from the kindly race of men / Or pass beyond the goal of ordinance / Where all should pause, as is most meet for all?" (28-31). A now enlightened Tithonus realizes the flaw in humanity attempting to subvert mortality. Mortality is inalienable from humanity and it is unreasonable to attempt to separate the two. Once Aurora grants Tithonus' wish to be immortal, he has no place amongst men or gods. He didn’t have the power to change his nature himself and he placed his fate in the hands of another, relinquishing what power he did posses. He commits to defying nature and he is left an abomination.

There also seems to be another lesson that Tennyson wants to impart, not to consume oneself with the lives of gods, but examine fully the gift that is humanity. Tithonus' fate in the Homeric Hymn is to be locked away, feeble and alone, babbling endlessly. Tennyson’s telling gives even more context to this eventuality. From Tennyson’s perspective, Tithonus has continued to beg for death, a gift that cannot be given. He has grown so old that he has lost all of his strength and the remnants of his humanity are so unbearable that his once great love has sealed him away. Tithonus has been abandoned due to his obsession with Aurora. Throughout the duration of "Tithonus", Tennyson muses on the mortality of our world and describes an appreciation for the eventuality of death. Tithonus mourns that "after many a summer dies the swan. / Me only cruel immortality / Consumes" (4-6). For a human, living as an immortal or a
god is consuming, devouring. He now sees that his only hope of happiness and peace lies in completing the cycle of humanity. His life is one of regret. A life where the gods have trifled with his being, a life where humanity is a distant memory that haunts him.