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A Study of Tennyson's Use of Light Imagery in Idylls of the King

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A Study of
Tennyson's Use of Light
Imagery in Idylls of the King

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the requirement for the degree of Master of
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A Study Of Influences On Tennyson's Use Of
Imagery In His Arthurian Poems

Alfred, Lord Tennyson was Poet Laureate of England from 1850 until his death in 1892. One of his greatest achievements was his brilliant series of poems about King Arthur and the Round Table: Idylls of the King. One of the aspects that makes the Idylls so moving is the poet's adept employment of imagery--especially images of light and shadow. Tennyson used light and shadow symbolism in all of his Arthurian poems, not only in the idylls, but also in "The Lady of Shalott," "Sir Galahad," "Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere," "Morte D'Arthur," and "Merlin and the Gleam" as well. One must stop and ask what were the possible influences on Tennyson's life that caused him to become so involved with the story of King Arthur, and, in his involvement, what impelled him to employ light and shadow images in the recreations of the tale? Tennyson most certainly was aware of the fact that many literary works contain light symbolism, and he could not help but be influenced by this knowledge. Thanks to Tennyson's son, Hallam, curious researchers can look back to his earliest days for other possible influences and find them in the poet's early interest in Milton, and in two things his grandmother impressed him with. Tennyson was sensitive to the natural world around him, and he was fascinated by the sea. Then, in Hallam's biography, and in

almost every other book written about Tennyson or his works, one discovers the close friendship that developed between Tennyson and a "flesh and blood" Arthur--Arthur Henry Hallam. Tennyson met Hallam while attending Cambridge, and Hallam's influence was pervasive in Tennyson's works. More recent critics looking back find other influences, including the Bible and other classics. All of these and other minor influences helped to shape the writer, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and helped to shape his poetry.

First of all, one must examine possible personal influences that helped shape Tennyson--the writer. From accounts in Hallam Tennyson's biography it is easily recognizable that Tennyson grew up in a house of imaginative people. From his earliest days, Tennyson was interested in Knights:

Like other children, the Tennysons had their imaginative games, they were knights and jousted in mock tournaments, or they were "champions and warriors, defending a field, or a stone-heap, or again they would set up opposing camps with a king in the midst of each. . . ."1

Tennyson's environment as a youth, although sometimes troubled with family problems, encouraged creativity:

Their [the Tennyson children's] imaginative natures gave them many sources of amusement. One of these lasted a long time: the writing of tales in letter form, to be put under the vegetable dishes at dinner, and read aloud when it was over. I have heard from my uncles and aunts that my father's tales were very various in theme, some of them humorous and some savagely dramatic; and that they looked to him as their most thrilling story-teller.²

Hallam goes on to write that Alfred's stories were often concerned with knights:

My aunt Cecelia (Mrs. Lushington) narrates how in the winter evenings by the firelight little Alfred would take her on his knee, with Arthur and Matilda leaning against him on either side, the baby Horatio between his legs; and how he would fascinate this group of young hero-worshippers, who listened open-eared and open-mouthed to legends of knights and heroes among untravelled forests rescuing distressed damsels. . . .³

Alfred went to school at Louth, where he stayed with his grandmother, and his son writes:

Two facts that his grandmother told him at this time impressed him. One was that she had become blind from cataract, and then had a dream that she saw; and, that, although couching for cataract was not common in those days, owing to this dream she had gone to London, and had been operated on successfully. The second was that she remembered having seen a young widow, dressed in white, on her way to be strangled (her body afterwards to be burnt) for poisoning her husband.⁴

Here the careful reader must recognize a direct influence on Tennyson, especially in his writing of the Idylls. As Camelot declines, Tennyson has it darken, and by the time the reader reaches "The Passing of Arthur" there is a pervasive mist. Tennyson's description of the mist could certainly have developed from conversations with his grandmother about her blindness. In the idyll he writes: "Nor ever yet had Arthur fought a fight / Like this last, dim, weird battle of the west. / A death-white mist slept over sand and sea. . . ." ⁵ The opaque mist could be

the type of problem a person with cataracts would have to deal with. Too, cataracts cause blindness, and in the Idylls, through his use of imagery, Tennyson has an increasing lack of vision lead to the downfall of Camelot. Also his grandmother's account of the woman in white very likely left a lasting impression in Tennyson's mind, for in the Idylls, one of the images directly related to light imagery is clothes symbolism. It is true that when Camelot is at its peak most of its inhabitants wear white, while as the city darkens, so the clothes of the people became many-colored; but the whiteness also recalls the whiteness of death. For example, in the idyll "Lancelot and Elaine," Elaine is laid on the barge by her family, and Tennyson writes: ". . . and she herself in white / All but her face, and that clear-featured face / Was lovely, for she did not seem as dead, / But fast asleep, and lay as tho' she smiled." (ll. 1151-1154) Similarly, in "The Lady of Shalott," the dead lady is "robed in snowy white. . . ." ⁶

Certainly Tennyson's surroundings influenced his choice of images and his brilliant ability to derive symbolism from nature. Tennyson grew up with his seven brothers and four sisters in Lincolnshire of Somersby. According to Hallam, his father was influenced by his environment:

He delighted too, to recall the rare richness of the bowery lanes: the ancient Norman cross standing in the churchyard, close to the door of the quaint little church: the wooded hollow of Holywell: the cold springs flowing from under the sandstone rocks: the flowers, the mosses, and ferns. ⁷

Henry Van Dyke writes:

They [the Idylls] are full of little pictures which show that Tennyson has studied Nature at first hand, and that he understands how to catch and reproduce the most fleeting and delicate expressions of her face.⁸

Tennyson, in his youth, was very observant of nature. For example, the one thing he remembered about the Louth school was "an old wall covered with wild weeds opposite the school windows."⁹

Nicolson writes of the influence of Tennyson's surroundings:

. . . let us forget the dulled monochrome of his middle years, forget the magnolia and the roses, the indolent Augusts of his island-home; forget the laurels and rhododendrons.

Let us recall only the low booming of the North Sea upon the dunes; the grey clouds lowering above the wold; the moan of the night wind on the fen; the far glimmer of the marsh-pools through the reeds; the cold, the half-light, and the gloom.¹⁰

This passage from Nicolson recalls Tennyson's less than perfect childhood. The quotation also brings to mind the poet's ability to picture a pervading darkness and evil spreading over Camelot. Perhaps, driven out of the house by unhappy family situations, Tennyson could let his imagination soar out of doors, and Hallam recalls his father saying, "Before I could read, I was in the habit on a stormy day of spreading my arms to the wind, and crying out 'I hear a voice that's speaking to the wind,' and the words 'far, far away' had always a strange charm for me!"¹¹ One of the types of images that relate closely to light and shadow

are those dealing with water, and Tennyson was certainly impressed by the sea in his youth. Hallam writes:

In the summer-time Dr. and Mrs. Tennyson took their holiday by the seaside, mostly at Mablethorpe. From his boyhood my father had a passion for the sea, and especially for the North Sea in wild weather. . . .¹²

Tennyson employed the idea of the wildness of the sea in the Idylls, and he often pictured bestial forces in the world as destructive waves. Similarly, Van Dyke writes, "Most remarkable of all is his knowledge of the sea, and his power to describe it. He has looked at it from every standpoint and caught every phase of its changing aspect."¹³

In 1827, however, Tennyson left the familiar surroundings of Somersby in order to attend Cambridge University. Ricks writes, "Not much is known of Tennyson's time in Cambridge from November 1827 to the spring of 1829."¹⁴ In 1829, however, Tennyson met Arthur Henry Hallam--Arthur in the flesh. Ricks continues,

The friendship of Hallam and Tennyson was swift and deep. Together they joined the Apostles, an informal debating society. . . . It was Hallam who proved himself the most urgently and enduringly perceptive admirer of Tennyson's poetry.¹⁵

Tennyson found a friend, and a "guiding light" in Arthur Henry Hallam, reminiscent of King Arthur himself. Nicolson refers to Arthur Henry Hallam as "the 'light of those dawn-golden times,' . . ."¹⁶ Here the resemblance between Hallam, and King Arthur

symbolized by the sun, is unmistakable. Later, Nicolson writes:

It must be realised, in the first place, that Tennyson had been expecting--nay, was anxiously awaiting--the advent of some such Messiah; that Hallam appeared upon the scene and took the necessary initiative of friendliness and persistence, at a time when Alfred considered himself, rightly or wrongly, to be "in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes."¹⁷

Thus, at a time when Tennyson's prospects were "darkened," Arthur Henry Hallam came, "letting in the sun," as did King Arthur in Camelot. Tennyson's hero-worship of King Arthur developed into a hero-worship of King Arthur's counterpart--his friend Hallam. Tennyson was crushed by Hallam's death, and in his grief, wrote one of the greatest elegies extant: In Memoriam. Ryals observes that:

What Hallam demands of poetry, and finds in Tennyson's, is an effect of lyrical intensity, a lyrical moment in which a landscape or an episode embodies an experience. In such a poem "The tone becomes the sign of feeling; and they reciprocally suggest each other." The excellent poet, therefore, is one who has both a precise eye and a precise ear, and the perfect poem is one in which everything speaks.¹⁸

If Hallam had lived he most certainly would have recognized the genius behind the images in Idylls of the King. Finally, Hallam Tennyson writes:

Here [in "Merlin and the Gleam"] my father united the two Arthurs, the Arthur of the Idylls and the Arthur "the man he held as half divine." He himself had fought with death, and had come out victorious to find "a stronger faith his own," and a hope for himself, for all those in sorrow and for universal humankind, that never forsook him through the future years.¹⁹

After examining personal influences on Tennyson, one must look to literary influences upon the poet. In Tennyson's earliest surviving letter, written to his Aunt Marianne Fytche, one of the literary influences becomes apparent. Tennyson talks about Milton's "Sampson Agonistes," as he writes: "His complaint of his blindness is particularly beautiful,"²⁰ and cites the following passage:

O loss of sight, of thee I most complain!
 Blind among enemies! O worse than chains,
 Dungeon or beggary, or decrepit age!
 Light, the prime work of God, to me is extinct,
 And all her various objects of delight
 Annulled, which might in part my grief have eased,
 Inferior to the vilest now become
 Of man or worm; the vilest here excel me:
 They creep, yet see; I, dark in light, exposed
 To daily fraud, contempt, abuse, and wrong. . . .
 Scarce half I seem to live, dead more than half.
 O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
 Irrecoverably dark, total eclipse
 Without all hope of day!
 O first created beam, and thou great Word,
 "Let there be light!" and light was over all.²¹

Here, the reader witnesses the fact that at the age of twelve Tennyson recognised a power in Milton through that poet's use of references to light and darkness. Paradise Lost influenced

Tennyson; there are important parallels between Paradise Lost and Tennyson's Idylls of the King. Milton's paradise, the garden of Eden, darkens as the inhabitants sin:

Earth trembl'd from her entrails, as again
In pangs, and Nature gave a second groan,
Sky low'r'd, and muttering Thunder, some sad drops
Wept at completing of the immortal Sin.²²

Similarly the light of Camelot more gradually dims as the inhabitants lose sight of their ideals. Milton also serves as a model author in writing powerful passages dealing with light; one immediately thinks of Satan's famous invocation to light,

Hail holy Light, offspring of Heav'n first-born,
Or of th' Eternal Coeternal beam
May I express thee unblam'd? since God is Light,
And never but in unapproach'd Light,
Dwelt from Eternity, dwelt then in thee,
Bright effluence of bright essence increate.²³

Also, in both works, the downfall of the utopia is caused, at least in part, by the sin of a woman. Van Dyke, likewise, comments:

Among all poets,--certainly among all English poets,--
it seems to me that Tennyson's next of kin is Milton.²⁴

Van Dyke goes on to point out that Tennyson ranks Milton first in The Palace of Art, above Shakespeare, Dante, and Homer.²⁵ Finally, Van Dyke observes that Milton "was the first to call attention to the legend of King Arthur as a fit subject for a great poem."²⁶ Turner also comments on Milton's influence on Tennyson, along with

other classical writers:

Virgil and Milton wrote first pastoral, and then epic. Tennyson, wishing to follow their example, was probably encouraged by the upsurge of interest in Homer which began in the 1840s, became conspicuous by 1857, when a reviewer in Blackwood's wrote that Homer was 'in danger of becoming the fashion,' and culminated in Matthew Arnold's On Translating Homer (1861), the immediate cause of Tennyson's Specimen of a Translation of the Iliad in Blank Verse (1863). . . . Tennyson, of course, wished to write a classical, not a Lyttonian epic. The Idylls were to resemble the Iliad in relating the fall of a great city and civilization, the Aeneid in presenting a hero with a divine, historic mission threatened by the woman that he loves (Dido, Guinevere), and Paradise Lost in explaining the loss of ideal happiness through sin and disobedience.²⁷

Turner goes on to give specific examples involving light and shadow symbolism:

Perhaps the most striking of the many Homeric echoes in the Idylls is the final battle in the mist, in which 'friend slew friend not knowing whom he slew' and the fallen 'Looked up for heaven, and only saw the mist' ('The Passing of Arthur,' 95-117). Though it recalls, like Arnold's 'Dover Beach' and Clough's The Bothie (ix, 51-54), the night-battle in Thucydides vii, the fighting in a mist, the looking up to heaven, and the 'cryings for the light' are primarily modelled on a passage in the Iliad (xvii, 645-7) which Longinus quoted as an instance of the sublime. There Ajax prays to Zeus to disperse the mist, and 'kill us in the light.' His prayer, unlike those of Arthur's knights, is answered.

Virgil and Milton also contributed numerous details; but the most important influence on the final literary form of the Idylls, as implied by their title, was Theocritus.²⁸

In a discussion about the influences on Tennyson, one cannot ignore Theocritus, whom most of Tennyson's critics mention. The title Tennyson chose, including the word "idylls," aroused much criticism in his day. Turner observes:

Theocritus . . . preferred to write only short poems, with a strong descriptive and pictorial element, and a highly wrought style . . . This was Tennyson's final model. . . . he [Tennyson] adopted the name of Theocritus's poems, retaining the Greek double l, to distinguish it from his own, and Theocritus' pastorals, and pronouncing the i as an idle, according to the current pronunciation of the initial ei in the Greek eidullion, doubtless to stress the word's meaning (a little picture), and its reference to Theocritus.²⁹

Ryals quotes Mackail in commenting on the title chosen by Tennyson:

Yet Tennyson himself called them idylls. And to understand them we should not forget this fact. Idylls of the King, says J. W. Mackail in his Lectures on Greek Poetry, "is a title carefully chosen and significant," for Tennyson "used the name (as he used language always) with precise meaning and with a complete understanding of its Greek meaning. Here as elsewhere he showed himself not only a poet but a critic of unrivalled insight and judgement."³⁰

Van Dyke, likewise, observes:

He [Tennyson] has been criticised very frequently for calling them Idylls. And if we hold the work to its narrower meaning, --"a short, highly wrought poem of a descriptive and pastoral character," --it certainly seems inappropriate. But if we go back to the derivation of the word, and remember that it comes from εἶδος,

which means not merely the form, the figure, the appearance of anything, but more particularly that form which is characteristic and distinctive, the ideal element, corresponding to the Latin species, we can see that Tennyson was justified in adapting and using it for his purpose. He intended to make pictures, highly wrought, carefully finished, full of elaborate and significant details. But each one of these pictures was to be animated with an idea, clear, definite, unmistakable.³¹

This author would agree most readily with Van Dyke's explanation, for it is relevant to Tennyson's use of imagery. It is the opinion of this author that Tennyson had his basic plan for symbolism thought out before he entitled the work, and the title he chose helps guide the reader in examining his work. Tennyson does indeed make pictures, and they are "highly wrought" and "carefully finished," nowhere more supremely than the ideas behind his light and shadow images. The careful reader will certainly receive a deeper appreciation for and understanding of the Idylls if he reads them paying close attention to Tennyson's specific "details"--especially those in his symbols and images.

In examining influences on Tennyson and his employment of images one cannot ignore the Bible. Tennyson most certainly had a working knowledge of the Bible; it must be remembered that his father was a member of the clergy. From Genesis on, there are many references to light in the Bible. In many ways, Tennyson's portrayal of King Arthur is similar to the descriptions of Jesus

in the Bible, especially concerning light. For example John 8:12 reads:

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."³²

Also, Tennyson depicts sin with darkness, as does the Bible. For instance, in the Bible it says:

. . . the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; . . .³³

Van Dyke observes, "I have found more than four hundred direct references to the Bible in the poems of Tennyson. . . ."³⁴ Later, Van Dyke writes:

The Idylls of the King are full of delicate and suggestive allusions to the Bible. Take for instance the Holy Grail:

When the Lord of all things
made Himself Naked of glory
for His mortal changes.

Here is a commentary most illuminative, on the fifth and sixth verses of the second chapter of Philippians. Or again, in the same Idyll, when the hermit says to Sir Percivale, after his successful quest,--

Thou hast not lost thyself
to find thyself, we are
reminded of the words of
Christ and the secret of
all victory in spiritual
things:

He that loseth his life shall find it.³⁵

One can see then that the influence of the Bible on the poet is especially noticeable.

There are other aspects which influenced Tennyson's creation of the Idylls of the King. One obvious influence was Malory, whom Tennyson used as a major source. Tennyson's knowledge of Celtic folklore and the Welsh bards most certainly influenced him, also. Turner observes:

'On Malory,' wrote Hallam Tennyson, 'on Layamon's Brut, on Lady Charlotte Guest's translation of the Mobinogion, on the old chronicles, on old French Romance, on Celtic folklore, and largely on his own imagination, my father founded his epic.'³⁶

It will also be seen later that Tennyson was influenced by the idea of the chain of being in that he incorporated its concepts into his imagery. After examining these various influences, however, one must agree with Hallam Tennyson, his father did create the Idylls "largely on his own imagination." Nowhere is Tennyson's imagination and ability as a writer more clearly exhibited than in his employment of images as a means of enriching his work. Just as Tennyson followed "the Gleam" throughout his life, so the careful reader can follow the light and related images through his works as a guide to their central meanings.

Notes

¹Hallam Tennyson, Alfred, Lord Tennyson A Memoir by his Son (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1905), I, p. 4.

²Hallam Tennyson, I, p. 5.

³Hallam Tennyson, I, p. 5

⁴Hallam Tennyson, I, pp. 6-7.

⁵Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Idylls of the King (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1896), "The Passing of Arthur" 11. 93-95. (All subsequent references are to this edition by individual idyll and line number.)

⁶Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "The Lady of Shalott" in The Poems of Tennyson, W. J. Wolfe, ed., (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1898), p. 550. All subsequent references are to this edition by individual poem title and line number.

⁷Hallam Tennyson, I, p. 4.

⁸Henry Van Dyke, Poetry of Tennyson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911), pp. 182-183.

⁹Hallam Tennyson, I, p. 7.

¹⁰Harold Nicolson, Tennyson (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1962), p. 306.

¹¹Hallam Tennyson, I, p. 11.

¹²Hallam Tennyson, I, p. 20.

¹³Van Dyke, p. 184.

- ¹⁴ Christopher Ricks, Tennyson Louis Kronenberger, ed. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), p. 31.
- ¹⁵ Ricks, p. 31.
- ¹⁶ Nicolson, p. 63.
- ¹⁷ Nicolson, p. 68.
- ¹⁸ Clyde de L. Ryals, From the Great Deep (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1967), p. 9.
- ¹⁹ Hallam, "Preface" xiv.
- ²⁰ Hallam, I, p. 8.
- ²¹ John Milton, Samson Agonistes in John Milton Complete Poems and Major Prose Merritt Y. Hughes, ed. (Indianapolis: The Odyssey Press, 1957), ll. 67-76 and ll. 79-84.
- ²² John Milton Paradise Lost in John Milton Complete Poems and Major Prose Merritt Y. Hughes, ed. (Indianapolis: The Odyssey Press, 1957), Book IV, ll. 1000-1004.
- ²³ Milton, Paradise Lost, Book III, ll. 1-6.
- ²⁴ Van Dyke, p. 50.
- ²⁵ Van Dyke, p. 51.
- ²⁶ Van Dyke, pp. 93-94.
- ²⁷ Paul Turner, Tennyson (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Ltd, 1976), p. 163.
- ²⁸ Turner, p. 164.
- ²⁹ Turner, pp. 164-165.
- ³⁰ Ryals, p. 3.
- ³¹ Van Dyke, pp. 161-162.

- ³²The Holy Bible Revised Standard Version (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1953), John 8:12.
- ³³The Holy Bible, Romans 13:12.
- ³⁴Van Dyke, p. 248.
- ³⁵Van Dyke, pp. 252-253.
- ³⁶Turner, p. 156.
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An Examination of Light and Shadow Imagery

In Tennyson's Other Arthurian Poems

One of the most striking aspects of Tennyson's poetry is the way in which he employs a few significant images to serve as unifying devices throughout his works. Tennyson's Arthurian poems, along with the Idylls, are examples of this. Specifically, "The Lady of Shalott," "Morte D'Arthur," "Sir Galahad," "Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere," and "Merlin and the Gleam" are all filled with light and shadow imagery. The important similarity between these poems and the Idylls is that the light and shadow imagery have the same implications in both. In "The Lady of Shalott" the imagery, and the poem itself, are prefigurations of the idyll "Lancelot and Elaine." The frame of "Morte D'Arthur" serves to introduce light imagery that works in the same way as the light imagery of "The Passing of Arthur." "Sir Galahad" contains light imagery very similar to that in the later idyll "The Holy Grail," and in "Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere" the poet employs images that he will later embellish in the Idylls. The brilliant poem "Merlin and the Gleam," the last of the Arthurian poems, sums up the poet's life's experiences, and the light imagery in this poem gives the reader the same symbolic eternity as he found in the Idylls of the King.

Not only is the poem "The Lady of Shalott" a prefiguration

of "Lancelot and Elaine" because of what happens, but most important the imagery in the poem is very like that in the idyll. "The Lady of Shalott" is filled with light and shadow imagery. In "Lancelot and Elaine" Elaine is an innocent girl who lives in a world of fantasy; she is pictured as a "light" who cannot bear the pressures of "false" lights around her. For example, Tennyson writes that she is "like a star in the blackest night." (l. 1235, "Lancelot and Elaine") In "The Lady of Shalott" the lady lives in an unrealistic world--she literally cannot look on the real world. "She has heard a whisper say, / A curse is on her if she stay / To look down to Camelot." (ll. 39-41, "The Lady of Shalott") So the lady stays in her room and "weaves by night and day / A magic web with colors gay." (ll. 37-38) In the same manner, Tennyson pictures Elaine staying in her tower, sewing a covering for Lancelot's shield.

"The Lady of Shalott" can only perceive the world through a mirror in her room, she cannot look directly out of her window, as Tennyson writes, "And moving thro' a mirror clear / That hangs before her all the year, / Shadows of the world appear." (ll. 46-48) Later in the poem, the lady tires of her predicament of never becoming involved with real people and says, "'I am half sick of shadows.'" (l. 71) Valerie Pitt comments on this section of the poem as follows:

On the other hand in The Lady of Shalott Tennyson is acutely aware that there is a danger in the encroachments of the outer world. The magical lady, watching her mirror, becomes aware of

human relationships and its possibilities . . . She attempts to leave the world of shadows, but in the attempt she destroys both her retreat and herself.¹

Here the shadow comes into play in the poem the magical lady can only see shadows of reality--imperfect images of real life. Similarly, Elaine stays in her room and dreams about Lancelot's adventures by examining the reflection of them in the marks on his shield. Thus, both girls are safe in the shadows of their rooms, away from the cruel light of reality.

In comparison, both women are attracted by the light of Lancelot. In both cases his attractive light leads to their deaths. In "The Lady of Shalott" Tennyson fills Part III of the poem with light imagery in association with Lancelot:

The sun came dazzling thro' the leaves,
And flamed upon the brazen greaves
Of bold Sir Lancelot (ll. 75-77)

The gemmy bridle glitter'd free,
Like to some branch of stars we see
Hung in the golden Galaxy. (ll.82-84)

The helmet and the helmet-feather
Burn'd like one burning flame together,
As he rode down to Camelot;
As often thro' the purple night,
Below the starry clusters bright,
Some bearded meteor, trailing light,
Moves over still Shalott. (ll. 91-99)

until finally:

She left the web, she left the loom,
She made three paces thro' the room,

She saw the water-lily bloom,
 She saw the helmet and the plume,
 She look'd down to Camelot. (ll. 109-113)

"The Lady of Shalott," drawn by the dazzling sight of Lancelot, disobeys the stipulations set for her and realizes, "'The curse is come upon me'" (l. 116) In his memoir Tennyson said, "The new-born love for something, for someone in the wide world from which she has been so long secluded takes her out of the region of shadows into that of realities."² In the same manner, Elaine left the protective surroundings of Astolat to follow Lancelot.

Another interesting comparison develops here, for Tennyson writes that before the lady of Shalott saw Lancelot directly, she first "saw the water-lily bloom." (l. 111) Here the flower imagery relates directly to Elaine who was constantly referred to as "the lily maid of Astolat." (l. 2 "Lancelot and Elaine") And earlier in "The Lady of Shalott" Tennyson writes that Shalott is an island "where the lilies blow. . . ." (l. 7) Thus, both women are associated with lilies. The seasonal imagery of Part IV of "The Lady of Shalott" and the autumnal symbolism in the idyll are very similar, and relate directly to the flower imagery. The seasonal imagery relates to the light and shadow imagery. The flower and seasonal symbolism work together to symbolically enrich the poems; and in the idyll, the flower of Elaine's young, tender life was killed symbolically by Lancelot's cold, autumn-like refusal to return her love. Similarly, in "The Lady of Shalott"

after the attractive light of Lancelot unsuspectingly lures the lady to her doom, Part IV of the poem becomes filled with autumn images, as Tennyson writes, "The pale yellow woods were waning" (l. 119) and later:

Lying, robed in snowy white
That loosely flew to left and right--
The leaves upon her falling light--
Thro' the noises of the night
She floated down to Camelot. . . . (ll. 136-140)

One can see then, how in both poems the passing of summer, the disappearance of warm lights and the attractions of false ones, destroy the lily-maids. The light, the true light, of Elaine and the lady is seen symbolically in the fact that they both wear white. White clothes, as will be seen in Chapter Three, are symbolic of purity because they are unblemished. Both girls reflect a pure, white light that is destroyed by the false lights of Camelot. Tennyson, therefore, also portrays both of their deaths as an extinguishing process, as he writes in "The Lady of Shalott," "And her eyes were darken'd wholly, / Turn'd to the tower'd Camelot." (ll. 148-149) In the same manner, in "Lancelot and Elaine" the poet writes, "the sad chariot-bier / Past like a shadow thro' the field, that shone / Full-summer." (ll. 1132-1134) Thus, the darkened city of Camelot, dimmed by the sins of its inhabitants, destroys the pure lights by its destructive influence.

Since "The Lady of Shalott" was published in 1833 and the idyll "Lancelot and Elaine" (first entitled simply "Elaine") was

published in 1859, twenty-six years after, one can see that Tennyson, as early as the poem, had decided to employ light-related images. It is very possible that Tennyson saw the effectiveness of light imagery in his earlier poems, and when it came time to write the idylls, this realization helped him decide to employ light symbolism again. Certainly, in examining the revisions Tennyson made in "The Lady of Shalott" one must see his attempt to make the imagery more meaningful. For example, in the fifth stanza of Part III the poet changed "water-flower" to "water-lily bloom," and in the last stanza of the poem Tennyson's revision included the addition of the line "the lighted palace." (l. 164) After the examination of the imagery in "The Lady of Shalott" and a comparison of it with the symbolism in "Lancelot and Elaine" these changes are significant in revealing the conscious design of the poet in using these images.

The "Morte D'Arthur" is even more relevant to the idylls than "The Lady of Shalott" because it is an idyll, "The Passing of Arthur," with an additional frame. Wolfe, in his notes on the poem, observes:

The 'Morte d'Arthur' has been incorporated, with no other change than the omission of a single line . . . in 'The Passing of Arthur,' . . . but it has continued to be included, with the original introduction and conclusion, in the complete editions of Tennyson.³

Therefore, this paper will examine only the contemporary frame of the poem and the use of light and shadow imagery in it. As

will be noted in the next chapter, time symbolism is often directly related to light imagery. For example, in "The Passing of Arthur" when Arthur dies, the poet symbolically portrays his death as the extinguishing of his light. Tennyson, however, gives the reader hope of a new Order, a new Camelot, because he has Arthur die just as the New Year begins. The connotations of this time element are obvious, the coming of the New Year implies the hope of new light in the future. In the introduction and conclusion of "Morte D'Arthur Tennyson has the same idea in force. For example, in the introduction the reader learns that it is Christmas Eve; the members of the gathering are discussing "the general decay of faith / Right thro' the world" (ll. 18-19). This is similar to what happens in the Idylls: the people of Camelot revert to animalistic depths after Arthur had struggled to inspire them with a deeper faith. In the same way, in the introduction, the reader learns that there is a distinct lack of faith on the brink of the dawning of the day celebrated for bringing hope for a foundation of a lasting faith in the form of a human life, Christ. Thus, just as the idyll ends seemingly with no hope, except the hope symbolized in the light and time imagery, so in the conclusion there is hope for this later generation portrayed by the poet through similar symbolism. The light imagery is strikingly parallel to that in the idyll, for immediately after the telling of the "Morte D'Arthur" the narrator explains that "our last light, that long / Had wink'd and threaten'd darkness, flared

and fell" (ll. 324-325). Just as Camelot's "light" (Arthur) is extinguished at the end, on the verge of dawn, so is the light in the room where the story was told, for the narrator goes on to explain that "The cock crew loud, as at that time of year / The lusty bird takes every hour for dawn." (ll. 333-334) The narrator then retires to bed where he dreams of the return of Arthur, and in the end he says, "That with the sound I woke and heard indeed / The clear church-bells ring in the Christmas morn." (ll. 353-354) Thus, one can see the calculated symbolism of the poet, paralleling the imagery to enrich the meaning of the introduction and conclusion. By having the extraneous framework of "Morte D'Arthur" contain the time element of the dawning of Christmas, Tennyson reiterates the hope for a resurgence of faith in his own day. Ryals, likewise, explains:

With the symbolic close the Christmas bells peal and wake the speaker. The implication is that the speaker's faith in human greatness and in legend is recovered. And having regained faith in these, he apparently is now also prepared to accept again the vitality of Christianity . . . What I want to point out is Tennyson's use of the frame to indicate the vitality of traditional material for his own time.⁴

The discussion of imagery in "Sir Galahad" will be brief because the poem is basically straightforward. The light symbolism in this poem is much like the light imagery in "The Holy Grail." The light here, as in the idyll, is used to represent the grail itself. For example, in stanza four Tennyson writes:

A gentle sound, an awful light!
 Three angels bear the Holy Grail
 With folded feet, in stoles of white,
 On sleeping wings they sail.
 Ah, blessed vision! blood of God!
 My spirit beats her mortal bars,
 As down dark tides the glory slides,
 And starlike mingles with the stars. (ll. 41-48)

The light imagery is also used to represent Galahad's purity, as contrasted with the darker, more worldly ways, as the poet writes:

When down the stormy crescent goes,
 A light before me swims,
 Between dark stems the forest glows,
 I hear a noise of hymns. (ll. 25-28)

As will be seen in the discussion of the idyll "The Holy Grail" Galahad is the one knight pure enough to actually see the true light of the grail. Pitt observes:

This whiteness and this glitter run all through the texture of St. Agnes, and appear again in Sir Galahad . . . This is easily recognisable as that bane of the later Victorian consciousness, the blend of aestheticism and romanticized religion, and it is significant that both these poems were favourites with the Pre-Raphaelite painters . . . [Tennyson] can without insincerity enjoy his imagination of purity and saintliness in St. Agnes' Eve just as in a finer poem, finer because less pretentious, Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere, he enjoys his imagination of a mediaevalised enamelled May.⁵

"Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere" was published in 1842, the same year as "Sir Galahad." In this poem, the light imagery does more than simply picture an "enamelled May," and if viewed

in context with the Idylls it has even greater significance. The sun symbolism is filled with deeper meaning as early as line three and four where Tennyson, in employing an oxymoron, writes, "The maiden Spring upon the plain / Came in a sunlit fall of rain." The poem pictures Lancelot escorting Guinevere to Camelot in the spring--the spring when they fell in love. The line quoted above takes on deeper significance when, after examining the light imagery in the Idylls, one realizes that Guinevere is depicted as a false light. The love of Lancelot and Guinevere becomes a destructive luminescence in the Idylls. Thus, the line explaining that the spring "came in a sunlit fall of rain" takes on more meaningful connotations. The spring out of which Lancelot and Guinevere's love developed, although beautiful and sunny, created a destructive force that brought false lights and tears into Camelot. The "balmy air" (l. 9) of Camelot was darkened by their affair. And as the poem progresses, the poet hints at this destructiveness. For example, in the second stanza the chestnut-buds are "drooping" (l. 16) and the river is "yellowing" (l. 15). In the next stanza it is significant that Tennyson writes, "She seem'd a part of joyous Spring; / A gown of grass-green silk she wore, / Buckled with golden clasps before; / A light-green tuft of plumes she bore / Closed in a golden ring." (ll. 23-27) Tennyson states directly that Guinevere only "seem'd" a part of the Spring--but the light issuing from her was a false light. In the last stanza of the poem Tennyson writes, "As she fled fast thro' sun and shade, / The happy winds upon her play's, (l. 37-38)

Here one sees Guinevere going from the sun to the shade; her life does the same in the Idylls, for as the "winds" of gossip spread the news of her illicit love for Lancelot, Guinevere's false light is extinguished. Guinevere finally repents toward the end of the Idylls, as will be discussed later, and she spends her remaining days in a nunnery. The tragedy of the secret, destructive love of Lancelot and Guinevere is reiterated in the last lines of the poem:

A man had given all other bliss,
And all his worldly worth for this,
To waste his whole heart in one kiss
Upon her perfect lips. (ll. 42-45)

"Merlin and the Gleam" was written after the other Arthurian poems and is considered by many to be one of Tennyson's greatest achievements. This poem is very autobiographical, as Stopford Brooke indicates in the following:

It is as lovely in form and rhythm and imagination, as it is noble in thought and emotion. It speaks to all poetic hearts in England; it tells them of his coming death. It then recalls his past, his youth, his manhood; his early poems, his criticism, his central labor on Arthur's tale; and we see through its verse clear into the inmost chamber of his heart. What sits there upon the throne, what has always sat thereon? It is the undying longing and search after the ideal light, the mother-passion of all the supreme artists of the world. "I am Merlin, who follow the Gleam." I know of no poem of Tennyson's which more takes my heart with magic and beauty.⁶

It is significant for all of Tennyson's poetry, especially the Idylls, that this very autobiographical poem should have each stanza end with reference to a light--"the Gleam." One of the things that makes it such a brilliant poem is Tennyson's combination of light and water images. As the next chapter will indicate, the water and light imagery are also combined at the end of "The Passing of Arthur" as a symbolic representation of eternity. As Arthur's light goes across the waters it becomes one with the Eternal Light, and he returns to that which he came from, as Tennyson writes, "'From the great deep to the great deep he goes.'" (l. 445) Ryals observes:

Tennyson presents human existence as separation from Eternal Reality, as, in metaphorical terms, an uncertain land area situated between two great bodies of water. Occasionally, in our most inspired moments, he says, we have glimpses of that immortal sea from which we came and to which we are to return . . . In the Idylls of the King Tennyson makes brilliant use of the sea and associated imagery to underscore this concept and to provide a structure for the twelve idylls. "Birth, is a mystery and death is a mystery," he [Tennyson] said in commenting on the Idylls, "and in the midst lies the tableland of life, and its struggles and performances" (Memoir, II, 127).⁷

In "Merlin and the Gleam" Tennyson demonstrates his ability as a poet, not only to catch a glimpse, but to grasp hold of a vision of the "Immortal sea" and the inspiring Gleam, and he is able to

translate the vision into words--here, and in the Idylls.

After examining the poet's calculated use of images in his Arthurian poetry it is apparent that Tennyson's adept employment of symbolism acts as an important unifying device. Many of the images used by the poet in his "other" Arthurian poems culminate in the Idylls. While "Merlin and the Gleam" is a summation of Tennyson's life and poetic philosophy, the abundant light imagery is reminiscent of his use of light symbolism in the other Arthurian poems. In the following passage, although Valerie Pitt is commenting on only a few specific poems, the ideas can be generalized:

The poet selects some moment in a well known story, for dramatic or descriptive presentation, and builds his theme upon this narrow base. The narrative, descriptive, or psychological interest of the story is maintained. The Lady of Shalott, The Hesperides, The Lotus-Eaters all present a true dramatic interest, they are not simply the obvious vehicle of a theme. Sometimes these poems may seem to be no more than 'pure poetry', nothing but incantation. Their underlying meaning begins to appear only with the repetition of images and symbolic motifs. The persistence of such images impresses the reader with a sense of meaning: it is not that he is forced to translate and decode the poem's descriptions, but that the constant recurrence of towers, islands, enchantments awakens significance not apparent on the surface of the poem.⁸

However, one must add to Pitt's list of persistent images,

especially light and shadow, as will become apparent in a close analysis of the Idylls of the King. Tennyson's "symbolic motif" of light and shadow gives the reader a "sense of meaning," and these symbols are threads that tie all of the poet's Arthurian works together.

Notes

¹Valerie Pitt, Tennyson Laureate (London: Aberdeen University Press, 1962), pp. 61-62.

²Hallam Tennyson, I, p. 117.

³W. J. Wolfe, ed., The Poems of Tennyson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1898), p. 807.

⁴Ryals, p. 19.

⁵Pitt, p. 123.

⁶Stopford Brooks in The Poems of Tennyson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1898), p. 550.

⁷Ryals, pp. 55-56.

⁸Pitt, p. 71.

A Study of Imagery in Tennyson's

Idylls of the King

Before examining the light and shadow imagery of Tennyson's Idylls of the King this thesis will analyze other images that both mirror the light and shadow images, and serve to add depth to them. The poet fills the Idylls with various images, but those images that specifically relate to those of light and shadow are four: bestial, water, seasonal, and clothes. The bestial imagery is the most dominant of these--Tennyson, through the use of bestial symbolism, demonstrates Arthur's struggle in attempting to found an ideal society where men live by high principles, shunning their baser desires. The bestial imagery reflects the shadow symbolism, for it mirrors the darker, animalistic tendencies in men that cast shadows over the idealistic, civilized Camelot. Likewise, bestial imagery illustrates how good characters revert to baseness as the Idylls progress. The point must be made here that Tennyson is drawing from medieval and Elizabethan ideas of the order of the universe and the great chain of being. Tillyard makes the point in The Elizabethan World Picture that the Elizabethans accepted the medieval idea that God placed man in the chain of being between the angels and the beasts.¹ They believed that the more spiritual a man was, the higher his place in the order of things; but if a man was

corrupt and sinful, he was lowering his position in the world to beast-like depths. Eggers, likewise, observes: "Tennyson inherited from the renaissance the view of man 'divided against himself by divine strivings and a bestial predisposition.' The four zones of sculpture on the hall of Camelot could be taken for a conventional representation of the renaissance scheme:

And in the lowest beasts are slaying men,
 And in the second men are slaying beasts,
 And on the third are warriors, perfect men,
 And on the fourth are men with growing wings. . . .
 ("The Holy Grail," lines 234-237)

But Tennyson implied that Arthur's attempt to make men from beasts is an acceleration of evolutionary processes. The knights' relapse into bestiality is a slipping backward as well as downward."² Certainly, Tennyson was reiterating the theme of the internal struggle of bestial man versus spiritual when, in the epilogue, he wrote, ". . . and shadowing Sense at war with Soul, / Ideal manhood closed in real man, . . ." (ll. 37-38, "To the Queen")

The water imagery is also connected with the great chain of being and the Elizabethan view of the universe, for Tillyard explains that they related the elements with man's being. The Elizabethans connected the element of water with the heart and circulatory system--the seat of passions.³ Therefore, like bestial imagery, water imagery in the Idylls sometimes reflects passion in men overriding reason. Water symbolism also enriches other themes in the work by illustrating the high ideals of

Camelot struggling against the waves that threaten to destroy it.

Seasonal imagery is found throughout the Idylls, and it mirrors the light imagery in that it helps depict the decline of Camelot. The clothes imagery relates very directly to the light imagery in the work, for just as the light is bright and pure in the beginning of the Idylls and then diffuses into darkness as the work progresses, so the clothes imagery reflects the same idea. The people of Camelot dress in white in the beginning, but as the influence of evil forces is increasingly felt, the people wear more varied-colored clothes. Eggers observes,

Tennyson used a succession of nature images which parallels and reinforces the light imagery in the Idylls. The Round Table dissolves as nature overwhelms the work of a king.⁴

There are other natural images related to light and shadow symbolism, such as weather and color. These images will be discussed and referred to throughout the examination of these basic four.

The first of the four relevant images, bestial symbolism, as has already been stated, is the most dominant. As early as line 45 of "The Coming of Arthur" the reader learns that the people who dwelt in the region of Camelot had been struggling against bestial influences, as Tennyson writes, "For here between the man and beast we die." (l. 45) A few lines later the reader learns that the first thing Arthur does upon his arrival is to destroy wild beasts in the area, "Then he drave / The heathen;

after, slew the beast. . . ." (ll. 58-59) Thus, Arthur aided the peoples' struggle in their attempt to improve their position on the chain of being. Lovejoy writes that there was a "conception of an endless prospect of bettering one's position in the universe, a prospect equally open to all rational beings."⁵

Since Arthur did help the inhabitants of Camelot "better" their positions, in the early Idylls, the only characters symbolized by beasts were the very bad ones: Vivien and Modred. These two characters are the major evil forces in the work except for Mark. Vivien and Modred are symbolized by Tennyson as snakes, the lowest form even of bestial life. As early as "The Coming of Arthur" Tennyson connects the serpent imagery with Modred as he writes, "But Modred laid his ear beside the doors, / And there half-heard--the same that afterward / Struck for the throne, and striking found his doom." (ll. 322-324) Vivien, throughout the idyll "Merlin and Vivien" is pictured as a snake; Tennyson describes her presence in Camelot as follows, "She play'd about with slight and sprightly talk, / And vivid smiles, and faintly-venom'd points / Of slander" (ll. 169-171) When Vivien gets Merlin alone in the world of raw nature her serpentine qualities blatantly emerge, as the poet writes:

And lissome Vivien, holding by his heels,
Writhed toward him, slid up his knee and sat,
Together, curved an arm about his neck,
Clung like a snake . . . (ll. 226-240)

Later, Tennyson describes her as being "Stiff as a viper frozen

... . ." (l. 843) And finally, Vivien's hair looks like a snake: "The snake of gold slid from her hair, the braid / Slipt and uncoil'd itself. . . ." (ll. 886-887)

Up to the idyll "Merlin and Vivien," however, Arthur's knights understand their priorities; they have their bestial natures under control. For example, in "Gareth and Lynette" Gareth's mother attempts to keep him a home and says to him, "follow the deer." (l. 89) Gareth's reply reflects his understanding of human natures, "Follow the deer? follow the Christ, the King, / Live pure, speak true, right wrong, follow the King-- / Else wherefore born?" (ll. 116-118) After "Merlin and Vivien" the knights lose sight of their original goals; therefore, bestial imagery is also used to symbolize good characters who lose faith in Arthur's ideals and revert back to a baser nature. The only exception is Balin, for in his fits of anger he becomes beastlike. As will be explained in the next chapter, Arthur's goals set for his men were too high-- he demanded perfection. Just as the people of Camelot slink from Arthur's light into darkness, so they also flee from his unattainable goal of humanity back into the beast.

In the begining of the idyll "Lancelot and Elaine" Guinevere uses bestial imagery in her speech as she talks with Lancelot about their love affair being threatened by gossip, "The tiny-trumpeting gnat can break our dream / When sweetest; and the vermin voices here / May buzz so loud--we scorn them, but they sting." (ll. 137-139) In the beginning of the next idyll

"The Holy Grail" the reader sees a girl needing Arthur's help pictured as being beast-like, "An outraged maiden sprang into the hall / Crying for help: for all her shining hair / Was smear'd with earth, and either milky arm / Red-rent with hooks of bramble. . . ." (ll. 208-211) Eggers comments on the above passage, "The transition to jungle begins early in 'The Holy Grail' when . . . men are becoming beasts again."⁶ Ryals makes observations about Lancelot, the highest knight, linking him with a beast:

Lancelot is obsessed by lions. When he meets Bors on his quest for the Grail, he tells that "there is a lion in the way" ("The Holy Grail;" l. 643). (Significantly, the shield of Lancelot bears lions on an azure field.) Then in his madness, the interior journey into the palace of Carbonek, he passes rampant lions at the sea gate which almost destroy him.⁷

Ryals, in attempting to make a point about men going mad in the wilderness, seems to miss the best passage which illustrates Lancelot acting beast-like, "Lancelot, who rushing outward lionlike. . . ." (l. 107, "Guinevere") Even here Tennyson is corresponding with the chain of being for the Elizabethans believed the lion to be the highest animal on the animal's chain of being, and Tennyson portrays Lancelot, the highest knight, in the highest animal form.

A good example of how things have changed at Camelot in terms of bestial imagery is Pelleas in the idyll "Pelleas and

Ettarre." Pelleas, like Gareth, is a young, enthusiastic knight. By the time the idyll ends, however, the reader sees a striking contrast in the two young knights. While Gareth shuns the ways of the beast, Pelleas, in his disillusionment sinks to beast-like depths. In the beginning of the idyll Tennyson writes:

the high doors
Were softly sunder'd, and thro' these a youth,
Pelleas, and the sweet smell of the fields
Past, and the sunshine came along with him.
(ll. 3-6)

Later, a change occurs in Pelleas when he is rejected by Ettarre. Ettarre ridicules his purity and innocence, and calls him, "Sir Baby." (L. 183) Ettarre's base sensuality is seen as she tells him, "Would rather that we had / Some rough old knight who knew the worldly way, / Albeit grizzlier than a bear, to ride / And jest with!" (ll. 184-187) Ettarre frequently refers to Pelleas as a dog in this Idyll, and, in fact, the reader sees Pelleas become hound-like as he lets his bestial sensual desires drive him to distraction. Tennyson himself compares Pelleas to a dog as he writes:

Back, as a coward slinks from what he fears
To cope with, or a traitor proven, or hound
Beaten, did Pelleas in utter shame
Creep with his shadow thro' the court again. . . .
(ll. 429-432)

One must see the connection here with shadow imagery, for as Pelleas degenerates, so his nature darkens. Pelleas rages like a beast and admits it in the following passage:

And whirl the dust of harlots round and round
 In dung and nettles! hiss, snake--I saw him there--
 Let the fox bard, let the wolf yell! Who yells
 Here in the sweet summer night but I--
 I, the poor Pelleas whom she call'd her fool?
 Fool, beast--he, she and I? myself most fool. . . .
 (ll. 461-466)

Here, one can see the inter-mingling of images, for although Pelleas is in the "sweet summer" of his youth, his sensual baseness and disillusionment darken his young life. At the end of the Idyll the reader witnesses not only the completion of Pelleas's degeneration as he "hisses" (l. 590) and goes from the court "into the dark." (l. 591), but also the combination of light and beast imagery.

King Arthur realizes his realm is returning to the beasts as well as darkening, for in "The Last Tournament" he says:

Or whence the fear lest this my realm, uprear'd
 By noble deeds at one with noble vows,
 From flat confusion and brute violences,
 Reel back into the beast again, and be no more?
 (ll. 122-125)

He voices the same concern in the last idyll:

For I, being simple, thought to work His will,
 And have but stricken with the sword in vain;
 And all whereon I lean'd in wife and friend
 Is traitor to my peace, and all my realm
 Reels back into the beast, and is no more.
 (ll. 22-26)

Arthur has every right to be discouraged, for it does seem as though nature has reclaimed his idealistic world, as Eggers comments:

"The Last Tournament" portrays a society ruled by the law of the jungle. . . . The autumnal sadness of the landscape suggests that the battle against nature has been lost. Swine and goats now seem wiser than Arthur, who has tried to make men from beasts (lines 325-326) The wet wind and dead leaf, the scorpion-worm that stings itself to death, the cat-like Mark, Arthur's own men, who pillage savagely, all attest to the triumph of nature.⁸

Thus, the bestial imagery helps reflect the shadowy, destructive forces of man's baser natures. It demonstrates how man, through yielding to the destructive forces from within, can become a lower link in the chain of being.

The water imagery, like the bestial imagery, in one way symbolizes threatening forces. For example, in "Lancelot and Elaine" when Lancelot is attacked by his unsuspecting family, they are described "as a wild wave in the wide North Sea. . . ." (l. 480) Later, in "The Last Tournament" Arthur calls the heathen "that ever-climbing wave. . . ." (l. 92) In Tennyson's description of the Red Knight falling off his horse in a drunken stupor he uses the same image:

But let the drunkard, as he stretch'd from horse
To strike him, overbalancing his bulk,
Down from the causeway heavily to the swamp
Fall, as the crest of some slow-arching wave,
Heard in dead night along that table-shore,
Drops flat, and after the great waters break
Whitening for half a league, and thin themselves,
Far over sands marbled with moon and cloud,
From less and less to nothing; thus he fell. . . .
(ll. 458-466)

Thus, in connection with bestial imagery and the Elizabethan view of the element of water the reader sees animalistic, passion-filled threats to Camelot symbolized by water.

Tennyson continues this use of water imagery in "The Passing of Arthur," for Arthur's point of departure from this life is on a narrow strip of land surrounded by water. After Arthur is wounded by Modred, Bedivere takes him to:

. . . a chapel nigh the field,
A broken chancel with a broken cross,
That stood on a dark strait of barren land:
On one side lay the Ocean, and on one
Lay a great water. . . . (ll. 176-180)

The symbolism of these watery surroundings is that man's civilized, spiritual nature is constantly threatened by his darker, more passionate side. It is significant that after the above passage, Tennyson refers twice to the "water lapping on the crag" (l. 239 and l. 284). The verb used here implies the symbolism of the animalistic side of man reflected in water imagery. Eggers connects water symbolism with the discussion of bestial imagery also, as he writes:

The nightmare vision of nature in "The Passing of Arthur" shows what man becomes when a whole society dissolves into bestiality. Men battle like creatures of the jungle in "Sweat, writhings, anguish, laboring of the lungs" (l. 115) but isolated by the mist on a waste-land coast 'Of ever-shifting sand' (Line 86).⁹

Ryals, on the other hand, has a somewhat different interpretation as he writes:

The geographical details in the closing lines are important because they serve to symbolize the relationship between time and eternity which Tennyson had been at such pains to establish in the preceding idylls. . . . Here we find symbolized Arthur's situation: he comes from the sea to stand for a while on the strands of time and, finally, to pass on to another body of water leading to the sea; in other words, we perceive that Arthur's kingdom exists in a moment of time arrested from the round of eternity.¹⁰

One must agree with Ryals' astute observations about water imagery, and they fit in nicely with the light imagery. For here, just as Arthur passes from water to water, so in the light and shadow chapter it will be explained how Arthur goes from being a light source of this world, and symbolically, becomes one with the eternal light of Christ.

In the same manner, the seasonal imagery relates to the light and shadow symbolism in illustrating the diminution of Camelot and its ideals. When Camelot is newly founded, and the knights and Arthur are filled with hopes, the season is spring. For example, the optimistic idyll, "The Coming of Arthur," takes place in a beautiful, brilliant spring, As Tennyson writes:

his knights
 Stood round him, and rejoicing in his joy.
 Far shone the fields of may thro' open door,
 The sacred altar blossom'd while with May. . . .
 (ll. 457-460)

Likewise, the idyll "Gareth and Lynette," an idyll about the high

aspirations of youth takes place in springtime; in the second line of the idyll the reader learns that it is "a showerful spring" and later on, "The damp hill-slopes were quicken'd into green, / And the live green had kindled into flowers, / For it was past the time of Easter-day." (ll. 181-183) Van Dyke comments on this idyll: "The atmosphere of this Idyll is altogether pure and clear. There is as yet no shadow of the storm that is coming to disturb Arthur's realm."¹¹ By the time "The Marriage of Geraint" begins, however, it is summer; this idyll is not as purely happy as "Gareth and Lynette" and summer, the hottest season, is emblematic of the hot passion of jealousy that will overtake Geraint. This idea is reflected in the following passage:

Al last, it chanced that on a summer morn--
 They sleeping together each by either--the new sun
 Beat thro' the blindless casement of the room,
 And heated the strong warrior in his dreams. . . .
 (ll. 69-72)

Van Dyke, again, observes here, "But in Geraint and Enid there is a cloud upon the sky, a trouble in the air. . . . It is in this brooding and electrical atmosphere that jealousy, in the person of Geraint, comes into conflict with loyalty, in the person of Enid."¹²

In "Balin and Balan" the season is still summer but the time element reflects an increasing foreboding in and around Camelot. "Balin and Balan" begins "one fair dawn" (l. 18) when Arthur "lightly smote" (l. 39) Balin and Balan. As Balin becomes increasingly disillusioned not only does he become beast-like, but the

setting also becomes dimmer; and Tennyson uses sinister language to describe it:

At length, and dim thro' leaves
Blinkt the white morn, sprays grated, and old boughs
Whined in the woods. (ll. 378-380)

Verbs like "grated" and "Whined" not only illustrate that Balin is away from civilized Camelot, but also imply that something is wrong in Camelot which drove Balin away.

As "Merlin and Vivien" begins, although it is still summer, the sinister language is increasingly employed as Vivien's evil presence is felt in Camelot. In the very first line the reader learns that the weather has worsened--"A storm was coming, but the winds were still. . . ." (l. 1) Eggers observes, "Tennyson introduced another nature motif in 'Merlin and Vivien', the wind and storms, to signify Vivien's foul speech and disruptive power."¹³

The idyll "Lancelot and Elaine" also takes place in the summer. But the reader gets the impression that it is late summer, for Tennyson incessantly refers to Elaine as "the lily maid of Astolat" (l. 2) and Elaine's life, her flower, is gone by the end of the idyll. The reader is left with the impression that as Camelot's "summer" passes, it destroys its flowers of innocence. This idea is expressed in Lancelot's reply to Elaine's plea for marriage:

This is not love, but love's first flash of youth,
 Most common: yea, I know it of mine own self;
 And you yourself will smile at your own self
 Hereafter, when you yield your flower of life
 To one more fitly yours, not thrice your age.
 (ll. 944-948)

Thus, the autumn of Lancelot's refusal destroys Elaine as she "yields" her "flower of life" to him. Gawain compares Lancelot to an autumn leaf when he wonders if Lancelot loves Elaine instead of Guinevere: "Would he break faith with one I may not name? / Must our true man change like a leaf at last?" (ll. 681-682) Lancelot's fiery passion does destroy Elaine, and, in symbolic language, Elaine's father expresses the same idea when he says, "Ay, a flash, / I fear me, that will strike my blossom dead." (ll. 964-965) Lancelot's autumn--his cold refusal of her flower of life, does destroy her. Guinevere is also to blame, for the poet also pictures her as a flower-destroyer in the following passage:

While thus he spoke, half turn'd away the Queen
 Brake from the vast oriel-embowering vine
 Leaf after leaf, and tore, and cast them off,
 Till all the place whereon she stood was green. . . .
 (ll. 1190-1193)

One can see then, how Tennyson, through his inter-mingling of images, was able to enrich the meaning of this idyll.

The next idyll in which seasonal imagery is significant is "The Last Tournament;" by the time this idyll begins it is definitely autumn, as Tennyson writes:

Dagonet, the fool, whom Gawain in his mood
 Had made mock-knight of Arthur's Table Round,
 At Camelot, high above the yellowing woods,
 Danced like a wither'd leaf before the hall.

(ll. 1-4)

The reader witnesses a degenerate Camelot at this point, and the weather seems to be reflecting the sad state of affairs in the once glorious city. As the last tournament begins a storm begins:

 then one low roll
 Of autumn thunder, and the jousts began;
 And ever the wind blew, and yellowing leaf,
 And gloom and gleam, and shower and shorn plume
 Went down it. (ll. 152-156)

After Tristram wins the ruby necklace and mocks the ideals of Camelot by flaunting his infidelity the gallery responds in the following manner:

The most of these were mute, some anger'd, one
 Murmuring, 'All courtesy is dead,' and one,
 'The glory of our Round Table is no more.'
 Then fell thick rain, plume droopt and mantle clung,
 and pettish cries awoke, and the wan day
 Went glooming down in wet and weariness. . . .
 (ll. 210-215)

Dagonet, again, is pictured as an autumn leaf "And little Dagonet on the morrow morn, / High over all the yellowing autumn-tide, / Danced like a wither'd leaf before the hall." (ll. 240-243)

Here Dagonet, literally a midget, and in that sense an example of "shrivelled" humanity, mirrors what has happened to the rest of the Order who have reverted to lower, dried forms--and have lost the vitality of their faith. Tristram, while thinking of

his lover, Isolt of Ireland, lies down and sleeps, and Tennyson employs seasonal imagery to illustrate his false "mellowness":

"Then he laid / His brows upon the drifted leaf and dream'd."
 (ll. 404-405) Tristram lay his head on a pile of autumn leaves, and while they were soft, they were also dead, and his adulterous love for Isolt would, likewise, soon be shrivelled. Thus, when Tristram awoke from his dream he "rode beneath an ever-showering leaf. . . ." (l. 491) In the same manner, Arthur's dissolving dreams are illustrated in the autumn images, as the poet writes:

That night came Arthur home, and while he climb'd,
 All in a death-dumb autumn-dripping gloom,
 The stairway to the hall, and look'd and saw
 The great Queen's bower was dark. . . .
 (ll. 749-752)

Finally, in "The Passing of Arthur" the time is full winter, and Tennyson writes in "Guinevere" that "the earth was dead."
 (l. 8) In the beginning of "The Passing of Arthur" the reader learns that Sir Bedivere, the narrator is "no more than a voice / In the white winter of his age. . . ." (ll. 3-4) These lines are symbolic, for at this point, the glory of Camelot is all but destroyed in its winter except for "a voice"--the voice of Tennyson giving it a new life through his recounting of its story. Ryals makes interesting observations about seasonal imagery in the Idylls as he writes:

The evanescent quality of Arthur's kingdom is suggested first of all by the multiplicity of cyclical images in the Idylls, which serve to emphasize that what comes into being must

eventually fade and die. One of the basic structural devices of the poem is the cycle of seasons, by which the poem proceeds from spring in the opening idyll to winter in the final one. This is of course emblematic of the fate of Arthur's kingdom as it moves from vitality and success to the blighting and death of all high hopes which nurtured its beginning.¹⁴

The clothes imagery, like the seasonal symbolism, reflects the disintegration of Camelot as an ideal. Eggers maintains:

At the same time there is a gragmenting of white light, suggesting wholeness and perfection, into the broken lights of the spectrum, generally suggesting sensuality or at least a love of surface expressions. As Camelot darkens and becomes more colorful, so to speak, the characters of the knights worsen. . . .¹⁵

At the start, the knights are clothed in white, along with the city of Camelot, since the light of their ideals is still bright and pure. This is exemplified in the following passage:

while in stainless white,
The fair beginners of a nobler time,
And glorying in their vows and him, his knights
Stood round him, and rejoicing in his joy.
Far shone the fields of May thro' open door,
The sacred altar blossom'd white with May. . . .
(11. 455-460)

And earlier in "The Coming of Arthur" the reader learns that "the Lady of the Lake, / Who knows a subtler magic than his own-- / (is) Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful." (11. 282-284)

Yet, as early as the idyll "The Marriage of Geraint" the reader learns through clothes imagery that troubles are creeping into Camelot. First of all, after Geraint asks for Enid's hand in marriage Enid "fell in longing for a dress / All branch'd and flower'd with gold. . . ." (ll. 630-631) Afterwards, Enid dreams that she is a gold fish in one of Camelot's pools, but the Queen has her cast out because she is "such a faded form." (l. 654) Here the reader witnesses the beginnings of the dangerous thought process of stressing externals over inward beauty. Geraint is the one who is ultimately mistaken, however, when he believes Enid to be false. Reed examines this in the following quotation:

Geraint's entire career, we have already seen, is the gradual discovery that attributes are neither to be discovered nor imposed in externals. At first, Geraint feels compelled to clothe Enid in beauty, 'so loved Geraint / To make her beauty vary day by day, / In crimsons and in purples and in gems.' (P. 1526). . . But the new clothes that she wears must be the garb of her true nature. Enid is already apparelled in the noblest kind of beauty; it is Geraint's ignorance that requires first the superficial raiment of splendor and then shabby insignia of shame.¹⁶

Geraint realizes his mistake in stressing the superficial by the end of the idyll.

Clothes imagery in the later idylls, on the other hand, comes to represent something more deadly than a false admiration

for the superficial. By the time the reader reaches "Merlin and Vivien" he sees the already tarnished Queen, Guinevere, "All glittering like May sunshine on May leaves / In green and gold, and plumed with green. . . ." (ll. 86-87) As the Queen's harmful influence begins to be felt, one sees her loss of purity reflected in her dress. Her "glittering" false light is also witnessed here as Tennyson weds the two images, and Guinevere's false light will be examined in greater depths in the next chapter. Camelot is seen becoming more colorful in "Lancelot and Elaine." The gallery waiting to watch the tournament "Lay like a rainbow fallen upon the grass. . . ." (l. 429) The symbolism is rich here, for the reader could connect the rainbow as a symbol of promise, and the promise of Camelot here has already been diminished.

The idyll that holds the most suggestive clothes imagery, however, is "The Last Tournament." As has already been mentioned, with the beginning of "The Last Tournament" comes the autumn, and just as the leaves turn colors in this season before they fall--dead--to the ground, so the clothes of Camelot's inhabitants become colored before the city's general decay. One of the dominant colors in an autumn woods is red, and red is the color that has replaced the pure white of "The Coming of Arthur." Tennyson couples the images of the diamond and ruby necklaces at the beginning of the idyll as a prefiguration of what will take place later in the idyll. Ryals comments on this,

As with the diamonds of the first tournament, the rubies, the prize of the last tournament take on complex symbolic value. The clear light of the diamonds, although refractory, changes to the darker light of the ruby carcanet.¹⁷

Lancelot, before judging the tournament, looks out and sees:

"the stately galleries, / Dame, damsel, each thro' worship of their Queen / White-robed in honor of the stainless child. . . ."

(ll. 165-167) But as the day of the tournament progresses the ideals of Camelot regress and Tristram, after winning the ruby necklace, reveals his infidelity. The people of Camelot become influenced by Tristram's debased nature and become like him.

Tennyson portrays this through clothes imagery:

But under her black brows a swarthy one
Laugh'd shrilly, crying: 'Praise the patient saints,
Our one white day of Innocence hath past,
Tho' somewhat draggled at the skirt. So be it.
The snowdrop only flowering thro' the year,
Would make the world as blank as winter-tide.

(ll. 216-221)

Thus, the "swarthy one" puts forth a false, Comus-like argument about an all-white nature's being boring; the people of Camelot take up her suggestion to dress "With all the kindlier colors of the field. / So dame and damsel glitter'd at the feast / Variously gay. . . ." (ll. 224-226)

Just as the people of Camelot had dressed in white to honor the death of the innocent babe, so they dressed in varied colors to "celebrate" the death of innocence and the loss of the ideals of Camelot. Turner comments:

The whiteness of the mist associated with Arthur and his whole enterprise connects with a pattern of colour imagery, in which white represents the eternal. Plato (Phaedrus, 247) had called the eternal reality 'colourless', and Shelley had developed the idea (Adonais): 'Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass, Stains the white radiance of Eternity,' and Browning in 'Numpholeptos' (1876), made elaborate symbolic use of the prism. Similarly, in the Idylls the Lady of the Lake, who, as Tennyson observed (Eversley) 'in the old legends is the Church,' and is associated with Christ ('The Coming of Arthur,' 290-3), wears 'white, samite, mystic, wonderful, and the female spectators of the Tournament of the Dead Innocence are 'white robed;' but their afterwards. . . symbolizes the general reversion to purely earthly values which, in connection with Tristram and the Red Knight, culminates in a horrible cataclysm of redness18

The importance of redness deserves a closer examination, for it relates to light imagery in reflecting the shadowy, evil forces opposing Camelot's ideals. As early as line 70 of "The Last Tournament" the reader learns that the enemy Arthur is struggling with is the Red Knight. When Lancelot hands Tristram the prize of the ruby necklace he notices that his hand is red. Color imagery related to hands is prevalent in the idyll: Isolt of Brittany is referred to as "Isolt / of the white hands. . . ." (ll. 396-397) Again in line 399 "those white hands of hers are alluded to." Isolt of Brittany, like the babe, was innocent, "she had served him (Tristram) well" (l. 399) and had "loved him well," (l. 400) but Tristram, by giving in to his baser natures,

was attracted by the "black-blue Irish hair and Irish eyes"
 (l. 403) of Isolt of Ireland. The culmination of the contrast
 between good (white) and evil (red) comes in Tristram's dream:

He seem'd to pace the strand of Brittany
 Between Isolt of Britain and his bride,
 And show'd them both the ruby-chain, and both
 Began to struggle for it, till his queen
 Graspt it so hard that all her hand was red.
 Then cried the Breton, 'Look, her hand is red!
 These be no rubies, this is frozen blood,
 And melts within her hand--her hand is hot
 With ill desires, but this I gave thee, look,
 Is all as cool and white as any flower.
 (ll. 406-415)

In this passage one can see Tristram's, and in a sense, Camelot's
 subconscious struggle with "hot" passion and "cool and white"
 rational goodness. Unfortunately, just as Tristram's blood
 overflows by the end of the idyll, so the passions of the
 inhabitants of Camelot escape their bounds, flooding and
 destroying all that it once stood for.

One can see then how Tennyson, through his extensive use
 of images, was able to deeply enrich the Idylls. In concluding,
 it must be noted that most of Tennyson's images come from
 nature; bestial water, and seasonal imagery are all obviously
 nature images. Clothes imagery is also related to the natural
 surroundings, even the colors of the clothes are described in
 terms of natural phenomena such as rainbows and fish. Along
 with the images discussed in this chapter the poet also uses
 bird and flower imagery extensively. Tennyson drew from the
 world he was most familiar with; his images, though oftentimes

complex, deal with subjects that most people would be familiar with. Tennyson's son, Hallam, quoted from Gladstone in commenting on his father's use of natural images: "Concerning the love of Nature, shown especially in the metaphors and similes, Gladstone has a remarkable passage:

"Nowhere could we more opportunely than at this point call attention to Mr Tennyson's extraordinary felicity and force in the use of metaphor and simile.

This gift appears to have grown with his years, alike in abundance, truth and grace. As the showers descend from heaven to return to it in vapour, so Mr Tennyson's loving observation of Nature and his Muse seem to have had a compact of reciprocity well kept on both sides. . . . Sometimes applying the metaphors of Art to Nature, he more frequently draws the material of his analogies from her unexhausted book, and however often he may call for some new and beautiful vehicle of illustration, she seems never to withhold an answer. With regard to this particular and very critical gift, it seems to us that he may challenge comparison with almost any poet, either of ancient or modern times."¹⁹

The cumulative effect of these images is to reinforce one of the prevalent themes of the Idylls. Just as the dominant symbol of Arthur's Order, the Round Table, suggests a cyclical movement, so the images, after this close examination, are seen to move from glorious heights to diminished depths. Turner makes this point in the following passages:

Between his 'beginning' ('The Coming of Arthur') and his 'end' ('The Passing of Arthur') he placed ten Idylls under the general title of

'THE ROUND TABLE.' By presenting his 'middle' as a circle, he almost invited the reader to see these Idylls as a revolving Wheel of Fortune, on which Arthur is first raised, and then, as in his fearful dream in Malory (XXI, iii), flung down into 'an hideous deep black water,' full of 'serpents, and worms, and wild beasts, foul and horrible,' Thus the whole central action is a large-scale peripeteia (literally a 'falling round'). . . .²⁰

Thus, these "other" images complement the thematic ideas stressed in Tennyson's light and shadow imagery. The poet's deliberate employment of these images is impressive in the Idylls, but Tennyson's use of imagery culminates in his extensive artistry in filling the poems with light and shadow.

Notes

- ¹E. M. W. Tillyard, The Elizabethan World Picture (New York: Vintage Books, 1959).
- ²J. Phillip Eggers, King Arthur's Laureate (New York: New York University Press, 1971), pp. 194-195.
- ³Tillyard
- ⁴Eggers, p. 193.
- ⁵Arthur O. Lovejoy, The Great Chain of Being (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 247.
- ⁶Eggers, p. 201.
- ⁷Ryals, pp. 185-186.
- ⁸Eggers, p. 202.
- ⁹Eggers, p. 203.
- ¹⁰Ryals, pp. 67-68.
- ¹¹Van Dyke, p. 201.
- ¹²Van Dyke, p. 201.
- ¹³Eggers, p. 199.
- ¹⁴Ryals, pp. 56-57.
- ¹⁵Eggers, p. 186.
- ¹⁶John R. Reed Perception and Design in Tennyson's Idylls of the King (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1969, p. 196.
- ¹⁷Ryals, pp. 127-128.

¹⁸Turner, pp. 167-168.

¹⁹Hallam Tennyson, II, p. 133.

²⁰Turner, p. 166.

Light and Shadow Imagery in

Idylls of the King

After examining the images that relate to light and shadow imagery it is apparent that Tennyson was very adept in filling the Idylls with meaningful symbolism, but it is the opinion of this writer that his most important use of imagery was that of light and shadow. The effective use of light and shadow imagery in Tennyson's Idylls of the King serves to enhance the meaning of both the poet's main characters and setting. The poet's use of light-related symbols is consistently employed in describing King Arthur's character, while his subtly different use of light imagery serves to underline the intrinsic malevolence of Vivien and the false light of Guinevere. Likewise, the impending decline of Camelot is foreshadowed by Tennyson's use of light imagery. The poet clothes his characters and setting in light and shadow so well that the reader finds it only fitting that Arthur should be repeatedly alluded to as "the sun," and yet the reader is carefully prepared to see no incongruity in Vivien's maliciousness being described as "a fierce light that beats upon the throne." ("The Dedication," l. 26). In similar fashion, from the outset one is encouraged to sense the ethereal quality of "shadowy" Camelot. Eggers observes, "As the story moves from the utopia of Arthur's court in 'The

Coming of Arthur' to the jungle and waste land of the concluding idylls, there is a general darkening of the landscape accompanying the loss of Arthur's ideal in Camelot."¹ It is this calculated use of light and shadow imagery that makes Tennyson's work both more complex and richer in meaning.

Tennyson symbolizes Arthur as the sun, on one level, to portray how King Arthur is the light that sustains life at Camelot, just as the sun maintains life on earth. Arthur is the force behind Camelot; he, together with Merlin, founds the city. Arthur works so that a higher standard of living, and a more idealistic lifestyle can be achieved; and it is because of his own charisma that Camelot is able to exist at all. Arthur fights against that darker, bestial side of mankind, and presents a "brighter" Christian outlook. In "The Coming of Arthur" Tennyson portrays Arthur as follows: "Then he drave / The heathen; after, slew the beast, and fell'd / The forest, letting in the sun, and made / Broad pathways for the hunter and the knight, / And so return'd." (l. 58-62) Later, when King Arthur contemplates marrying Guinevere, this idea is presented again, as Arthur says, "And reigning with one will in everything / Have power on this dark land to lighten it." (ll. 91-92) Ryals observes:

Throughout the Idylls Arthur is described in terms of brilliant light. In "The Coming of Arthur" the child is borne from the sea in a wave of flame. When Merlin picks up the babe, both "the child and he were clothed in fire" (ll 381-389). Lancelot acknowledges Arthur as king when, he says, "the fire of God / Descends upon thee in the battlefield" (ll. 127-129) The attributes of

Arthur, furthermore, are described in terms of light. Excaliber has a "blade so bright / That men are blinded by it" ("The Coming of Arthur," ll. 299-300) The statue of Arthur made by Merlin has a crown and wings which flame and assure the people that they have a king ("The Holy Grail," ll. 241-245). The rays of light falling on the three queens near Arthur's throne are "Flame-color, vert, and azure" ("The Coming of Arthur," l. 274).²

Unfortunately, Ryals goes on to state that "This (light) imagery is fairly obvious. . . ." ³ Basically, Ryals only lists the more obvious light images; but there are less than obvious light symbols that will be examined in depth in this chapter.

The light imagery continues as the knights of Camelot sing a song after the marriage of Arthur to Guinevere, and in one stanza they refer directly to King Arthur as their "sun," as they sing, "Blow, for our Sun is might in his May! / Blow, for our Sun is mightier day by day! / Clang battle axe, and clash brand! Let the King reign!" ("The Coming of Arthur" ll. 496-498) This quotation illustrates how much the knights of the Round Table depend on Arthur, and trust his ability to lead them. Afterwards, in the idyll "Gareth and Lynette," Gareth refers to King Arthur as the sun; and as he contemplates confronting his mother with the prospect of going to Camelot, he thinks to himself:

Until she let me fly discaged to sweep
 In ever-highering eagle-circles up
 To the great Sun of Glory, and thence swoop
 Down upon all things base, and dash them dead,
 A Knight of Arthur, working out his will,
 To cleanse the world. (ll. 20-25)

Here, one can see Arthur portrayed as the sun in the sense of the center of the universe, toward which all things grow, and around whom all things revolve. Eggers also comments on the light symbolism in "Gareth and Lynette":

Camelot is still bright, its light is generally symbolic of virtue, but deceptive images also occur. Gareth's opponents are named the Morning Star, the Noonday Sun, and the Star of Evening; but all are villains. On the other hand, Death, advancing fearsomely in half-light, proves to be only the disguise covering "the bright face of a blooming boy" (l. 1373).⁴

The character of King Arthur is not only symbolized as a life-sustaining sun, but Tennyson also utilizes the sun imagery to illustrate the idea that Arthur's seeming perfection is unattainable to those around him, and thus, a source of real frustration. In "The Coming of Arthur," as Arthur is crowned King and binds the knights to himself, the poet describes the knights as follows:

Bound them so strait to vows to his own self
That when they rose, knighted from kneeling, some
Were pale as at the passing of a ghost,
Some flush'd, and others dazed, as one who wakes
Half-blinded at the coming of a light. (ll. 261-265)

Here, Arthur is symbolized as the sun to show how his unblemished example is almost too much for his knights to fully comprehend. Even in this early quotation, the reader gets a hint that the knights want to follow and imitate their King, but they are bewildered by the height of the goal set for them. Eggers,

likewise, observes, "In the prologue to In Memoriam Tennyson expresses the hope that men will learn to bear the divine light; the Idylls is a lament over the fact that the light is often too strong for human eyes."⁵ Guinevere explains her own infidelity in "Lancelot and Elaine" as she tells Lancelot that Arthur is too good for her. She shows the very real human frustration of trying to love one who seems aggravatingly perfect, as she says, "Arthur, my lord, Arthur the faultless King, / That passionate perfection, my good lord -- / But who can gaze upon the sun in heaven?" (ll. 121-123) And she goes on to admit, "For who loves me must have a touch of earth; / The low sun makes the color" (ll. 133-134) Thus, Tennyson uses the sun imagery to show how Arthur sets himself up as a goal, not realizing that human frailty would keep most from achieving it. He loves Guinevere and yet is so busy being a good King that he appears to be unaware of her frustrations and unfaithfulness. Tennyson uses light symbolically to show more intensely how Arthur's seeming perfection keeps him from understanding the imperfections in others.

One must say "seeming" perfection in referring to Arthur because he is supposed to be a human being, and the only truly perfect man, in reference to the Christian faith, was Jesus Christ. Tennyson's use of light-related symbols subtly helps the reader to understand this contradiction. In the Bible Jesus is referred to as "the light of the world." A Victorian audience would be well aware that a true Christian should model

himself on Christ's example. Arthur makes a mistake when he binds the knights to himself, even if he is an almost perfect Christian. Arthur sets himself up as the reigning light of Camelot, but the fact that King Arthur is human makes him less forgiving than Christ. Christ only expects men to strive to be perfect, but He offers forgiveness, as He understands that none will attain absolute perfection. King Arthur, however, binds the knights with strict vows and leaves no room for error. He frustrates the knights of the Round Table by expecting ultimate perfection. In "The Last Tournament" Tristram voices the idea that the vows were too strict for imperfect men as he asks:

Had Arthur the right to bind them to himself?
 Dropt down from heaven? Wash'd up from out the deep?
 They fail'd to trace him thro' flesh and blood
 Of our old king: Whence then a doubtful lord
 To bind them by inviolable vows,
 Which flesh and blood perforce would violate.
 (ll. 679-684)

Guinevere voices a similar attitude most poignantly in "Guinevere" when she realizes that Arthur is only human. Tennyson, by using light imagery, portrays how Guinevere understands too late that Arthur is not a perfect being, although he sets unattainable goals for those around him, as she says:

Would not look up, or half-despised the height
 To which I would not or I could not climb.
 I thought I could not breath in that fine air,
 That pure severity of light --
 I yearn'd for warmth and color which I found
 In Lancelot--now I see thee what thou art,

Thou art the highest and most human too,
Not Lancelot, nor another. (ll. 638-645)

Here, one can see then that Arthur is not the most perfect "sun," and should not have let himself be the main source of sustenance for Camelot. Arthur, as symbolized by the sun, can be seen as one who sets himself apart from the human emotions of his subjects, and even of his wife, perhaps because he felt the position of King called for this. Arthur espouses the Christian faith, and yet cuts his followers off from the comfort it offers by being too strict with them. Perhaps the reason Merlin refers to Camelot as "a city of shadowy palaces" (l. 297) as early as the idyll "Gareth and Lynette" is that he realizes that although Arthur's light maintains Camelot, still, it is not complete.

Arthur's incompleteness and his less than perfect light are illustrated by Tennyson through Arthur's vision which dims as the Idylls progress. Arthur's "lights"--his eyes--are described as being very accurate in the first idyll:

When Arthur reach'd a field of battle bright
With pitch'd pavilions of his foe, the world
Was all so clear about him that he saw
The smallest rock far on the faintest hill,
And even in high day the morning star.
(ll. 95-99)

Eggers comments on the above passage:

At the triumphant beginning of his reign
Arthur's eyesight is keen . . . But after
the downfall of his Order, just before the
last battle, it seems to him

as if the world were wholly fair,
 But that these eyes of men are dense and dim,
 And have not power to see it as it is.
 Perchance because we see not to the close.
 ("The Passing of Arthur"
 ll. 18-21)

. . . And in the battle "even on Arthur fell /
 Confusion, since he saw not whom he fought,"
 ("The Passing of Arthur"
 ll. 98-99)⁶

Arthur's loss of vision is not symbolic of a loss of ideals. His failure lies not in the fact that he does not live up to his ideals, but rather, that he is not able to see the human needs in others. Tennyson surrounds Arthur with myths about his origin, and yet Tennyson allows him to be seen as a human because he cannot reach perfection. In fact, Tennyson was so concerned that his readers understand Arthur was only human that his son, Hallam, reminded the readers that Tennyson rewrote the epilogue to strengthen this point:

On the other hand, having this vision of Arthur, my father thought that perhaps he had not made the real humanity of the King sufficiently clear in his epilogue; so he inserted in 1891, as his last correction,
 "Ideal manhood closed in real man. . . ."⁷

Reed writes:

As man, when spirit, passes temporarily into material existence; so man, while flesh, temporarily rises to spiritual experience. East and West, life and death, are "dim lights," mysteries obscuring our perceptions in between.⁸

Later, Reed observes, "Man is his own prison, accepting the incarnation of the flesh; he is self-blinded, accepting the opacity of substance. . . ."9 Merlin says in "Gareth and Lynnette" that Arthur cannot brook the shadow of a lie. (l. 286) Arthur's eyesight, however, is imperfect because he is human and he often cannot discern in others what he should. He lets Vivien mingle in the court, and he allows Lancelot and Guinevere to remain close, without seeing the truth. Perhaps part of Merlin's disillusionment in "Merlin and Vivien" is caused by his own realization that Arthur does brook the shadow of lies in his less than perfect humanity. This could have been the reason that Merlin, in his story to Vivien, recounted that the only man to see everything clearly was an old Seer who had no materialistic desires. Merlin explained, ". . . to him the wall / That sunders ghosts and shadow-casting men / Became a crystal." (ll. 626-628) Reed makes a similar observation in his book, as he writes, "It is the old unsensual wizard of Merlin's recounting who is the true Seer; owning no sensual wishes. . . ."10 Eggers, likewise, comments:

The *Idylls*, a tragedy of human shortsightedness, ends fittingly at night with the forces locked in the "last, dim, weird battle of the west" ("The Passing of Arthur," line 94). A white mist, blanker and more suggestive of nothingness than the vivid blackness of "Guinevere," makes the battle a confusion in which everyone's sight fails . . . in the epilogue, Tennyson links the idea of limited vision to the social meaning of the poem for his own era: faith

must be kept, he urges, even though the Victorians have not found their utopia, and "the goal of this great world / Lies beyond sight" (Lines 59-60).¹¹

In the same manner, Ryals generalizes the loss of vision to include most of the major characters of the Idylls as he writes:

Almost all the actors in the Idylls are, in one way or another, victims of their illusions. Lynette thinks Gareth a kitchen knave, Geraint believes Enid false, Balin accepts Lancelot and Guinevere as worthy models, Merlin blinds himself to the snares of Vivien, Elaine lives in fantasy, the Grail knights follow wandering fires, Pelleas convinces himself that Ettarre loves him, Tristram and Isolt seek salvation in erotic passion, Guinevere is blinded to the greatness of the King, Bedivere is deluded by material values. Each of them does not or cannot see reality for what it is--and so because of their imperciency they fail. And in their failure they help to bring about the failure of the King. For their transgressions deny the validity of the King's great illusion--namely, that he can create a perfect society.¹²

The connection with light-shadow imagery and Ryal's observation is obvious; the short-sightedness of Camelot's inhabitants helped cause its doom, and it is no wonder Tennyson introduces "Geraint and Enid" with reference to blindness:

O purblind race of miserable men,
How many among us at this very hour
Do forge a lifelong trouble for ourselves,
By taking true for false, or false for true;
Here, thro' the feeble twilight of this world

Groping, how many, until we pass and reach
That other where we see as we are seen! (l. 1-7)

Arthur, though he cannot see things clearly, and is not as perfect as Christ, does further the Christian cause, and in doing so Tennyson uses light imagery to illustrate how Arthur does not die but only "passes" from life to life. Arthur is good enough to receive Christ's forgiveness, even though his unattainable goals are among the reasons Camelot fails. There is a song Tristram sings in "The Last Tournament" in which Tennyson uses light imagery to show the reader this idea; "And one was water and one star was fire, / And one will ever shine and one will pass." (ll. 730-731) In this quotation, Arthur can be seen as the "one" of "water" who "will ever shine." Thus, although Arthur's light is imperfect, he eventually will become one with the true light. This idea is reiterated through light symbolism in "The Passing of Arthur" where, at the end of the Idyll, Arthur "passes" from this life. Arthur floats out on the barge, and Tennyson describes the scene, "till the hull / Look'd one black dot against the verge of dawn," (ll. 438-439). The dot being black could imply that Arthur's light must be eclipsed in death before being made one with the light of God. Tennyson writes that the dot is on "the verge of dawn," symbolizing the idea that the saving light of Jesus is waiting just on the other side of death. Then, at the end of the idyll, Arthur receives ultimate salvation, and as he is able to relinquish his light he, at last, becomes one with the eternal light, as Tennyson

writes, "Somewhere far off, pass on and on, and go / From less and less and vanish into light." (ll. 467-468)

The poet not only symbolizes the various aspects of King Arthur's character with light imagery, but also reveals the "darker" character of Vivien by picturing her in light-related terms. Tennyson portrays Vivien throughout the Idylls as a character of unmotivated viciousness. One cannot help but think that as Tennyson wrote the "Dedication" of this work that he had Vivien in mind when he wrote these lines, "Before a thousand peering littlenesses, / In that fierce light which beats upon a throne / And blackens every blot." (l. 25-27) Vivien is the poet's example of intrinsic evil. The first time the reader sees Vivien, in "Balin and Balan" she is singing a song, the words of which imply that she is a sun-worshipper. Since King Arthur is fighting to overcome baser civilizations, the fact that she is a sun-worshipper warns the reader that Vivien is a pagan, and, therefore, opposed to the Christian ideals which Arthur espouses:

The fire of Heaven is lord of all things good,
And starve not thou this fire within thy blood,
But follow Vivien thro' the fiery flood!
The fire of Heaven is not the flame of Hell!
(ll. 446-449)

then she goes on to sing,

This fire of Heaven,
This old sun-worship boy, will rise again,
And beat the cross to earth, and break the King
And all his Table. (ll. 453-456)

The reader can see in her song that Vivien is antagonistic to Arthur and Camelot and wants to destroy them both. Vivien's vicious desires to crush Camelot are later seen as she destroys any glimmer of hope Balin might still have with her insinuations about Guinevere. Tennyson describes her, at this point, as smiling "sunnily." At first glance, the adverb would not seem to fit, until one realizes the poet's misnomer is deliberately connecting Vivien with an evil light, whose flame is kindled when it darkens the outlook of others.

In the idyll "Merlin and Vivien" Tennyson continues his symbolic representation of Vivien as a malignant light. Vivien's illumination is the type which, if allowed to flourish, will make a place seem darker than it is. For example, as soon as she gains a foothold on Merlin's affections, the poet pictures Merlin as one who "walk'd in dreams and darkness." (l. 188) Later on, in the forest of Broceliande, as Vivien entangles herself in Merlin's beard, she is alluded to as "a lovely, baleful star, / Veil'd in gray vapor." (ll. 260-261) Here, again, Tennyson is implying that a rather ominous light issues from her. Another time in this idyll, Vivien's true light becomes even more evident as the poet writes, "But Vivien, deeming Merlin overborne / By instance, recommenced and let her tongue / Rage like a fire among the noblest names. . . ." (ll. 799-801) In this quotation the reader clearly sees Vivien's nature portrayed as a destructive one. As her introductory song suggested,

she wants to harness her energies in an attempt to crush Arthur and his knights of the Round Table. Vivien later describes herself as one "who loved to make men darker than they are. . . ." ("Merlin and Vivien" l. 874) Vivien is correct in her self-estimation. Just as the sun sustains life on earth, it also must cast shadows as the earth revolves around it. Vivien's main purpose is to cast shadows, darkening Camelot and the high ideals its inhabitants struggle to maintain.

Tennyson's association of Vivien with light is not only used to portray her as evil, as she casts shadows over Camelot, but it also symbolizes her ability to deceive Merlin. In "Merlin and Vivien," Vivien plays on Merlin's emotions. Merlin seems to be aware of her false intentions and yet her interest in him is flattering. Merlin, ironically, apologizes to Vivien for suspecting her of attempting to bereave him of his "name and fame," as he says, "Your pardon, child. / Your pretty sports have brightened all again." (ll. 302-303) Another time, Vivien is shown getting back into Merlin's good graces through her ability to "shine," as Tennyson writes, "And Merlin look'd and half believed her true / So sweetly gleamed her eyes behind her tears, / Like sunlight on the plain behind a shower. . . ." (ll. 398-401) As Vivien increasingly is able to appease Merlin the setting proportionately grows darker, "and the dark wood grew darker (l. 888) . . . til he (Merlin) let his wisdom go / For ease of heart, and half believed her true. . . ." (ll. 890-891) Finally, during the darkest point of the storm, Vivien gains

possession of the charm. At this moment, Tennyson pictures Vivien, ". . . and in the glare and gloom, / Her eyes and neck glittering went and came." (ll. 957-958) Her evil light bursts forth as her malicious goal is attained.

Tennyson not only enhances the characters of Arthur and Vivien with light imagery, but also clothes the setting in symbolic illumination and darkness. In order to portray Camelot's decline by utilizing shadow imagery the poet must first bathe Camelot in a brilliant light during the brief hour when it seems to be an ideal city. It is widely assumed that one reason Tennyson wrote the idyll "Gareth and Lynette" was to show Camelot in its height of glory. As the reader looks to this idyll he can see light symbolism to support this idea. For example, when Gareth enters the hall of King Arthur he sees the knights, and Tennyson describes the scene as follows:

but in all the listening eyes
of those tall knights that ranged about the throne
Clear honor shining like the dewy star
Of dawn, and faith in their great king, with pure
Affection, and the light of victory,
And glory gain'd, and evermore to gain. (ll. 320-325)

This passage clearly pictures the scene as one of hopeful anticipation. At this point, the knights and the city are free of any disillusionment. Earlier in this Idyll, Merlin, disguised as the "old Seer," explains how Camelot was built, "And fairy queens have built the city, son; / They came from out a sacred mountain-cleft / Toward the sunrise" (ll. 255-257) Merlin's description shows the ethereal quality of Camelot, as

it was supposedly built by fairies, and even at this juncture makes the reader wonder perhaps if the city can be maintained by frail men. Still, there is a reassurance in this quotation, as the fairies build the city "Toward the sunrise," and this gives the sense of better things to come.

Tennyson, however, complicates the light imagery and, on another level, even as early as the idyll "Gareth and Lynette" hints at the transitory quality of the city. As has already been stated, in this idyll, Merlin refers to Camelot as "a city of shadowy palaces." In Camelot's perfection there are still shadows of evil; the city's inhabitants seek to sustain its ideals, but are plagued with human frailty. At the beginning of the next idyll, "The Marriage of Geraint," the reader sees the light already beginning to waiver, as Tennyson writes:

And loved her as he loved the light of heaven.
 And as the light of heaven varies, now
 At sunrise, now at sunset, now by night
 With moon and trembling stars. . . . (ll. 5-8)

Although this quote is referring to Geraint's love for Enid, it could also be relating the idea that the knights' love for Camelot, and its ideals, is beginning to flicker, and this is reflected in the varying "heavenly" lights and shadows of the city. Even as early as "The Coming of Arthur" the description of the setting can be taken to imply its decline; and as King Arthur marries Guinevere the poet writes, "The Sun of May descended on their King." (l. 461) This quotation is

paradoxical, for as the "Sun of May" comes closer it makes the scene warmer, and yet the sun has reached its peak and is now on its way to setting.

The poet uses light imagery in relation to the setting to symbolize the disillusionment and disenchantment of those who dwell in Camelot. For example, the idyll "Balin and Balan" begins with "one fair dawn" (l. 18) but as Balin's hopes are destroyed the setting grows darker. Eggers observes, ". . . 'Balin and Balan' is the first to have a tragic ending; furthermore, the scarcity of light images and the multiple errors of the eye in 'Balin and Balan' reinforce the impression of growing evil. A lovely simile of a distant fire reflected in a cabin window suggests how remote and indirect the influence of the ideal has become in the Order (lines 226-232)."¹³ When Balin leaves Camelot and enters the forest he goes "eastward from the falling sun." (l. 15) When Vivien's insinuations crush his beliefs in Camelot, Balin is described as "Remembering that dark bower at Camelot. . . ." (l. 518) Finally, at the end of the idyll, as Balin dies, all glimmer of hope escapes him, as he says, "now / the night has come." (ll. 609-610) The same thing happens with Elaine in "Lancelot and Elaine." When this section opens, Elaine's idealistic nature makes her put Lancelot's shield "where morning's earliest ray / Might strike it." (ll. 5-6) Here, the reader can sense the freshness of the light that surrounds Elaine. But as Elaine tends to Lancelot's wounds, later, filling herself with false hopes, she is described as

follows, "So day by day she past / In either twilight ghost-like to and fro." (ll. 843-844) Here, the poet's symbolism shows how the light dims in the dusk of evening, foreshadowing Elaine's terrible demise. Finally, at Elaine's death, Tennyson pictures the light on her face as "the blood-red light of dawn." (l. 1019) This line represents the fact that Elaine's innocence allowed her to fall prey to the evil in others, and although the darkness does not quench her spiritual beliefs, it does destroy her physically. After she dies, the poet illustrates the idea that Camelot's illumination lessens as it loses its good inhabitants. Elaine is forced to become only a shadow, as Tennyson writes, "the sad chariot-bier / Past like a shadow thro' the field, that shone full-summer." (ll. 1132-1134) The darkness of Camelot is portrayed poignantly as Tennyson describes Elaine as being "like a star in the blackest night." (l. 1235)

Tennyson continues his symbolic portrayal of the setting as he shows how Camelot gets darker, and its guiding light is lost to the knights of the Round Table, as the city's ideals are over-shadowed with a pervasive evil. The knights are discouraged by the high expectations of King Arthur, and Camelot begins to lose its glamor for them as they become frustrated and disillusioned. The brightness of Spring and the promises it holds have passed, and the poet pictures Camelot not only as dark, but also as cold and seemingly indifferent to its own ideals. One passage that portrays this idea is in the idyll "Pelleas and Ettarre," when Pelleas finds Gawain with Ettarre.

As he leaves, he looks back "at her towers that, (seemed) larger than themselves / In their own darkness." (ll. 448-449) Pelleas is completely dejected and disillusioned by the end of this idyll as he realizes that Camelot's utopian quality has waned. Tennyson writes that Pelleas rides on despondently, "till the gloom / That follows on the turning of the world / Darkened the common path. . ." (ll. 537-539) From his dismal vantage point Pelleas views Camelot in the eerie light of dusk and groans, "Black nest of rats . . . Ye build too high." (l. 544) Eggers, likewise, observes, "'Pelleas and Ettarre' takes place mostly at night; after his frustrating love for Ettarre; Pelleas journeys from the physically dark field to the morally benighted Camelot, where he hisses at the queen and returns to the dark, preferring true darkness to false lights."¹⁴ This same representation of Camelot continues in the idyll "The Last Tournament" as Tennyson describes Lancelot acting as the umpire of the last tournament; and as he looks out over the setting he sighs "weariedly, as one / Who sits and gazes on a faded fire, / When all the goodlier guests are past away. . . ." (ll. 156-158) This is a stirring passage which shows how Camelot is symbolized as a light about to be extinguished. Lancelot cannot help but be depressed as he looks about him and sees all that he worked for crumbling. Later, in the same Idyll, the day is described as a dismal autumn day, as the poet writes:

and the wan day
 Went glooming down in wet and weariness;
 But under her black brows a swarthy one
 Laugh'd shrilly, crying: 'Praise the patient saints,
 Our one white day of Innocence hath past,
 Tho' somewhat draggled at the skirt.

("The Last Tournament"
 11. 214-219)

This quote clearly points out how the scene at Camelot has changed outwardly from Spring to a dreary Autumn, and the hearts of its inhabitants have grown cold and despondent.

The idyll "The Holy Grail" also illustrates the idea of disillusionment and despondency in Camelot; the knights of the Round Table disregard their duties to King Arthur and go off in search of a Heavenly vision. Perhaps one reason these knights feel a need for a deep religious experience is because they feel they can never attain the goals Arthur has set for them. Ryals comments:

As a knight of the Round Table Percivale is, I think we are clearly given to understand, something of a failure. Having failed to distinguish himself in knightly "glory," he eagerly turns to the Grail quest when the idea presents itself. By the time of "The Holy Grail" something is clearly wrong in Camelot; and Percivale, I believe, epitomizes the unrest in Arthur's kingdom.¹⁵

The fact that Arthur tells the men, "This chance of noble deeds will come and go / Unchallenged, while ye follow wandering fires / Lost in the quagmire!" (11. 319-321) shows that Arthur felt a sense of his unreachable earthly light which causes his knights

to follow after a heavenly vision. The Holy Grail itself is referred to in terms of light. For example, Percivale explains, "and then / Stream'd thro' my cell a cold and silver beam, / And down the long beam stole the Holy Grail" (ll. 115-117)

Again, the Holy Grail is described in terms of light--"A crimson grail within a silver beam" (l. 155) and "A beam of light seven times more clear than day; / And down the long beam stole the Holy Grail / All cover'd with a luminous cloud. . . ."

(ll. 187-189) It is significant, then, that Tennyson chose to describe the statue of Arthur with flaming wings in this idyll, for it sets up the comparison of the grail's light with his light that failed to keep his knights around him. Arthur calls himself "Too dark a prophet" (l. 322) and he seems to sense that his knights are losing touch with their high ideals. He "had fears that it (Camelot) would fall, / So strange, and rich, and dim. . . ." (ll. 341-342) The absence of the disillusioned knights does cause destruction, and in symbolic use of Arthur's statue again, the reader witnesses some of Arthur's hopes for Camelot extinguished as Tennyson writes, "And from the statue Merlin moulded for us / Half-wrench'd a golden wing. . . ."

(ll. 729-730) Eggers observes:

Arthur warns the knights that they will follow wandering fires, as they do; the grail itself is a deceptive promise of redemption for all but Galahad. It appears on a beam of light reminiscent perhaps of the spiritual light that once inspired the Order. On the quest the various knights frantically pursue false

lights in many forms, but only Galahad is surrounded by the pure white light of truth. Those who return find a Camelot darker than before the appearance of the grail. . . .¹⁶

Ryals likewise observes, ". . . the strict vow enjoined on Percivale by the King has resulted in the knight's realization of his inability to live up to what is expected of him. . . ."¹⁷

Ryals goes on to conclude:

Arthur's closing speech is, I believe, the key passage to an understanding of "The Holy Grail." Through Arthur's words, Tennyson speaks for the realization of self to be attained through duty and service in the ethical sphere of existence. Man should indeed, says Tennyson here and again in "Merlin and the Gleam," be guided by the gleam; but, the poet insists, the gleam hovers over the world, touching on man and his works. Not until the end of life does it point heavenwards, when, says Arthur, man's work is done.¹⁸

It is significant to note here that the Holy Grail itself was not a false light, but all of its followers but Galahad were listening to a false "gleam"--they were groping for a moving experience in life without listening to true spiritual guidance from within. Hallam Tennyson's interpretation is the same, as he writes, "And in some, as faith declines, religion turns from practical goodness and holiness to superstition These seek relief in selfish spiritual excitement, not remembering that man's duty is to forget self in the service of others, and to

let visions come and go, and that so only will they see 'The Holy Thing.'¹⁹ Thus, Camelot has darkened because many of Arthur's knights forego their earthly duties.

Tennyson also uses light-shadow imagery to demonstrate how Camelot is darkened because some of its people in authority have lost their honor. Guinevere is the most obvious example here, for throughout the idylls she acts as a false light; her honor changes to dishonor, and her shadow is cast over Camelot. It is surprising that most of Tennyson's critics have overlooked Guinevere's false light. Other than vague references to false lights in general and Guinevere's symbolic repentance, no mention is made of it in the prominent critics. In the very first idyll Arthur depends on Guinevere to add power to his "light," he senses in her a light-giving source, as he says:

But were I joined with her,
Then might we live together as one life,
And reigning with one will in everything
Have power on this dark land to lighten it,
And power on this dead world to make it live.

Guinevere's light, however, is not a life-sustaining luminescence like Arthur's, and her true feelings can only shine in the shadows. Therefore, her influence at Camelot is a false light, a fire that brings destruction and darkness to Camelot. The fire imagery, with its destructive implications is seen at the end of "The Coming of Arthur," for when Guinevere and Arthur leave the chapel after their marriage Camelot looks "all on fire / With sun and cloth of gold. . . ." (ll. 478-479)

One way Guinevere's false light is evident in the earlier idylls (through "Merlin and Vivien") is in the fact that her sincere efforts to help members of the court bring counter results. For example, in "The Marriage of Geraint" Guinevere is seen to be a true friend to Enid. Before Geraint marries Enid Guinevere promises him:

But ere you wed with any, bring your bride,
And I, were she the daughter of a king,
Yea, tho' she were a beggar from the hedge,
Will clothe her for her bridals like the sun.
(ll. 228-231)

Later in the idyll Geraint explains,

I vow'd that, could I gain her, our fair Queen,
No hand but hers, should make you Enid burst
Sunlike from cloud--and likewise thought perhaps,
That service done so graciously would bind
The two together. (ll. 787-791)

Afterward, due to Guinevere's rumored infidelity, however, Geraint begins to doubt Enid's faithfulness because of her friendship with the Queen. Thus, Guinevere's false light nearly convicts Enid through association, and almost causes Geraint's life in his testing of Enid's love.

In the same manner, in the idyll "Balin and Balan" Guinevere's influence of false light is seen as she darkens Camelot. Balin, the brother with the rash temper, is left in Camelot to struggle with becoming a knight. Balin feels unworthy and discouraged, but Tennyson writes:

But this worship of the Queen,
 That honor too wherein she holds him--this,
 This was the sunshine that hath given the man
 A growth, a name that branches o'er the rest. . . .
 (ll. 175-178)

Guinevere's good influence, her "sunshine," quickly turns into a malevolent brightness that casts doubts of shadows into Balin's mind, and with the use of light imagery Tennyson describes the scene where Balin sees Guinevere and Lancelot's meeting: "All round her prest the dark, / And all of the light upon her silver face / Flow'd. . . ." (ll. 257-259) Here, Guinevere's negative influence is seen clearly, for after witnessing their secret meeting, Balin is so disillusioned that "in him gloom on gloom / Deepen'd. . . ." (ll. 281-282)

Later, in the same idyll, in her vivid, symbolic terms Guinevere's light--the light of her crown shining from the tree in the forest where Balin has wandered attracts Vivien's attention, and thus causes another malignant influence on Balin. Tennyson writes, "Before another wood, the royal crown / Sparkled, and swaying upon a restless elm / Drew the vague glance of Vivien" (ll. 456-458) Finally, Balin succumbs to her lies because he remembers "that dark bower at Camelot. . . ." (l. 518) Guinevere's presense in the shadows, her leave-taking of her proper place of light leads directly to the death of Balin, and his brother, Balan.

Again, in "Merlin and Vivien" Guinevere is pictured as "all

glittering like May sunshine on May leaves. . . ." (l. 86) And in "Lancelot and Elaine" her negative influence on her lover, Lancelot, is illustrated through light imagery. In this idyll, Lancelot almost falls in love with Elaine, and yet his passion for Guinevere keeps him from doing what he knows he should do. Tennyson explains that when Lancelot even considered a relationship with Elaine a "bright image" (l. 877) . . . Dispersed his resolution like a cloud." (l. 879) Here, very clearly, it is Guinevere's false light that negatively influences Lancelot. Later on Guinevere throws a jealous fit, and just before throwing Lancelot's gift of diamonds into the river she says, "tell her (Elaine) she shines me down. . . ." (l. 1218) Here, Guinevere is comparing herself to Elaine in light terms, and the sad truth is that her evaluation is correct--for Elaine's light was much truer than Guinevere's.

Even the women characters whom the reader is less sympathetic with are seen as being influenced by Guinevere's false luminescence. For example, in "Pelleas and Ettarre" Ettarre's name implies a light source, meaning star in French, and her light, like Guinevere's, is false. Tennyson employs light-related terms to describe Ettarre, "the heat / of pride and glory fired her face, her eye / Sparkled. . . ." (ll. 164-166) Then, when Ettarre shuns Pelleas, Guinevere is quick to respond as she says, "We marvel at thee much, / O damsel, wearing this unsunny face. . . ." (ll. 172-173) It is ironic

that Guinevere can recognize the shadow-casting influence of another woman while she is insensitive to her own.

Isolt of Ireland, Mark's wife, is another female character seen to have the same false light as Guinevere's, and she, like Guinevere, is an adultress. When Tristram looks at Isolt of Ireland, Tennyson describes her appearance, "A low sea-sunset glorying round her hair / And glossy throated grace, Isolt the Queen." (ll. 507-508) Joanna Richardson in her book The Pre-Eminent Victorian, comments on this passage, "The women remain Victorian ideals. . . ." ²⁰ Then she goes on to cite Ettarre as another example, referring to another quotation with light symbolism in it. While Richardson uses these passages to support her point, she is missing the deeper significance they hold in relation to light imagery and its commentary on the female characters.

After viewing Guinevere's false light, and remembering the earlier examination of bestial imagery, one must agree with Eggers when he writes:

The overpowering bestiality and the conquering darkness of "Pelleas and Ettarre," "The Last Tournament," "Guinevere," and "The Passing of Arthur" remind us that when a society follows false lights, it may become worse than a tribe with no ideal whatever. ²¹

From the evidence just examined, Guinevere must be considered one of those false lights. Tennyson, however, does not blame her

completely for the fall of Camelot, and by the end of "Guinevere" the reader witnesses Guinevere's repentance, again symbolized through light and shadow. The idyll begins in an opaque darkness, as Tennyson writes, "Beneath a moon unseen albeit at full, / The mist, like a face-cloth to the face, / Clung to the dead earth, and the land was still." (ll. 6-8) The poet portrays Guinevere's partial recognition of her guilt in a poignant passage when he describes her dream:

On some vast plain before a setting sun,
And from the sun there swiftly made at her
A ghastly something, and its shadow flew
Before it till it touch'd her and she turn'd
When lo! her own, that broadening from her feet,
And blackening, swallow'd all the land, and in it
Far cities burnt, and with a cry she woke.
(ll. 76-82)

Here, very explicitly the poet illustrates Guinevere's realization that her unfaithfulness darkened Camelot, and her shadow helped to destroy its very foundation.

This dream caused Guinevere to go to Lancelot and try to convince him that they should not meet anymore, as she says,

And if we meet again some evil chance
Will make the smouldering scandal break and blaze
Before the people and our lord the King.
(ll. 89-91)

Lancelot and Guinevere continue to meet, however, until they are caught. Perhaps this is why Guinevere can hardly bear the song of the young nun, who sings,

Late, late so late! and dark the night and chill!
 No light had we: for that we do repent,
 No light: so late! and dark and chill the night!
 (l. 166, 169, 172)

Eggers remarks, ". . . she (Guinevere) hears a novice sing a song of night and disappointment. Guinevere later answers the novice's pert moralizing with the question, 'What knowest thou of the world and all its Lights / And shadows, all the wealth and all the woe?' (lines 341-342)."²²

As Guinevere reaches a full realization of her guilt, Tennyson pictures her repentance in light images, as the reader sees Guinevere's false light literally setting. This occurs in the moving farewell scene between King Arthur and Guinevere. At first, Guinevere only hides her false light as Arthur enters her room--"There with her milk-white arms and shadowy hair / She made her face a darkness from the king. . . ." (ll. 413-414) Arthur, however, confesses an awareness of her influential false light as he says:

Better the King's waste hearth and aching heart
 Than thou reseated in thy place of light
 The mockery of my people and their bane! (ll. 521-523)

Arthur's words cause Guinevere to completely repent, and the reader witnesses her sinking light; Guinevere falls down at Arthur's feet, and Tennyson writes:

I did not come to curse thee, Guinevere,
 I whose vast pity almost makes me die
 To see thee, laying there thy golden head,
 My pride in happier summers, at my feet. (ll. 530-533)

Eggers observes,

In the depths of her moral experience suggested by the darkness as well as the light the queen at this moment surpasses the dramatic force of her earlier passions; her dignity rivals the king's.²³

Reed, in his book, comments:

the struggle for redemption has began. Guinevere flees to the convent to protect herself; she remains to aid others . . . The symbolic moment of redemption is the moment when she humbles herself before her proper Lord and throws herself at Arthur's feet. It is her acknowledgement of her sin and her liberation from, the concerns of self. Nowhere else in the Idylls is the symbolic movement from pride to humility more clearly presented.²⁴

On the other hand, Ryals writes,

To see the Idylls only as the presentation of the downfall of a kingdom resulting from the sin of adultery is, in my estimation, to take a partial view of this very complex philosophical poem . . . On a higher and primary level the Idylls demonstrates dramatically what happens when a community denies its obligations to the Ideal--the Ideal "closed in real man," that is, as embodied in Arthur.²⁵

Certainly the reader sees the culmination of Arthur's struggle with espousing ideals in "The Passing of Arthur," and the reader also

must see Arthur's struggle with darkness. Tennyson uses light imagery to show the reader that, although Camelot itself is only a fleeting reality, still the ideals it struggles to espouse will remain, at least in the hearts of those who believe in them. The poet writes, "And there, that day when the great light of heaven / Burn'd at his lowest in the rolling year," (ll. 90-91) showing that it is the shortest day of the year, and thus, symbolically represents a time of foreboding and darkness. During this last battle, the setting is so cold and dark that, "even on Arthur fell, / Confusion, since he saw not whom he fought. / For friend and foe were shadows in the mist, / And friend slew friend not knowing whom he slew. . . ." (ll. 98-101) Camelot and its surroundings have all but disappeared in the darkness of the heathen world around it. The knights dying in battle are described as looking up to heaven for some sort of reassurance but "only saw the mist." (l. 112) And "In that close mist, (there was) crying for the light, / Moans of the dying, and voices of the dead." (ll. 116-117) There is only darkness, however, for Camelot is all but destroyed. The ideals the Order struggled to espouse are lost in a dark confusion of morality. Some have repented, and yet the darkness of sin seems to be triumphant in that last dim battle. Hallam writes:

So if Guinevere's repentance and the King's forgiveness: so too of the repentance of Lancelot, whose innocent worship of beauty had turned into the "guilty love," and of

whom we are told that he died "a holy man."
 But repentance could not avert the doom
 of the Round Table. The "last dim
 weird battle" my father would quote
 as some of his best work, and would
 allow that it was a "presentment of
 human death" as well as of the
 overthrow of the "old order". . . . 26

Tennyson writes on, however, and a glimmer of hope is seen on the horizon. First of all, even as Arthur is dying a light glows from him, as the poet writes, "That made his forehead like a rising sun / High from the dais-throne. . . ." (ll. 385-386), and even in his death King Arthur is still a noble leader. In the last line of the work Tennyson gives the reader the impression that although Camelot will disappear, the light of its ideals will remain, as Tennyson writes, "And the new sun rose bringing the new year." (l. 469) Thus, the work ends with a promise of hope for future generations. Eggers comments, "The golden year recedes into the future as an ideal of what human society might be if it were perfect, and the Round Table, an 'image of the mighty world,' dissolves, having been from the outset a dream."²⁷ Ryals, more optimistically suggests:

Ultimately, the Idylls of the King is not the pessimistic work that it at first appears. Though we witness Gotterdammerung we also in the symbolic close are presented with the dawn betokening a new life . . . the symbolic close of the Idylls suggests that though the Christian hero, like Arthur, may perish, there is ever imminent another kind of hero who will come forth in another guise to justify moral existence.²⁸

In the final analysis Tennyson's ability as an artist is seen because he is able to take, on the one hand, a single light-related symbol, such as the sun, and give that symbol a variety of meanings. The poet cleverly uses the light imagery to underline Arthur's idealism; and at the same time the sun symbolism reveals Vivien's deceitfulness and Guinevere's false luminescence. Likewise, Tennyson's detailed concern for the central stage, Camelot, contributes to the overall artistry and depth of the Idylls of the King. The poet carefully darkens the city of Camelot as the action proportionately brings about its doom. Tennyson, however, does not end his work on a darkened stage, and as the curtain falls over the characters of Camelot, the reader cannot help but catch a glimmer of hope from all that has gone before.

Notes

- ¹Eggers, p. 186.
- ²Ryals, pp. 107-109.
- ³Ryals, p. 109.
- ⁴Eggers, p. 188.
- ⁵Eggers, p. 186.
- ⁶Eggers, p. 187.
- ⁷Hallam Tennyson, II, p. 129.
- ⁸Reed, p. 218.
- ⁹Reed, p. 225.
- ¹⁰Reed, p. 221.
- ¹¹Eggers, pp. 192-193.
- ¹²Ryals, p. 192.
- ¹³Eggers, p. 189.
- ¹⁴Eggers, p. 191.
- ¹⁵Ryals, p. 154.
- ¹⁶Eggers, p. 190.
- ¹⁷Ryals, p. 158.
- ¹⁸Ryals, pp. 178-179.
- ¹⁹Hallam Tennyson, II, p. 131.
- ²⁰Joanna Richardson, *The Preeminent Victorian* (Oxford: Alden Press, 1962), p. 115.
- ²¹Eggers, p. 210.

²²Eggers, p. 191.

²³Eggers, pp. 191-192.

²⁴Reed, p. 77.

²⁵Ryals, p. 110.

²⁶Hallam Tennyson, II, p. 132.

²⁷Eggers, pp. 210-211.

²⁸Ryals, pp. 111-112.

The Conclusion

A careful reading of Tennyson's poetry leads to the inescapable conclusion that his use of light imagery in Idylls of the King was brilliant. Many of the work's most memorable lines are those containing light or shadow symbols; but more important, the poet's employment of light and shadow imagery not only adds depth to the work, but also helps to unify it. Ricks argues that the Idylls are not a complete entity; and:

. . . the discrepancy is a revealing one, not because of insincerity but because of vacillation. No other poem of Tennyson's was created with such a central uncertainty, as to its shape, style, sequence, and size.¹

One must, however, vehemently disagree with Rick's unfounded observations. Tennyson does have a central "shape" to his epic, and nowhere is it more visible than in his light and shadow images which consistently reiterate thematic material throughout the Idylls. For example, there is no "vacillation" in Tennyson's representation of King Arthur as the sun. From "The Coming of Arthur" to "The Passing of Arthur" Tennyson symbolizes Arthur as a light source: even in his symbolic passing Arthur's light becomes one with the eternal light of Christ. Guinevere, throughout the Idylls, is portrayed as a false light. Her

character acts as a malignant luminescence that helps destroy the ideal Camelot, and her repentance is symbolized in terms of a setting sun. Evil characters, like Vivien, are consistently referred to as false lights and shadow casters. In the beginning, the people of Camelot follow the true light of Arthur, but even Arthur's light, as a light, had to cast some shadow; so that eventually Camelot becomes lost in the shadows of a mist of confusion. Tennyson had to have had a central plan to have developed such consistent images throughout the work. The poet also indicates a sense of "sequence," as the images reveal, first the ideal Camelot, and then the Camelot on the decline, and ultimately, Camelot extinguished.

Ricks then goes on to say:

But it is the similes and the descriptions which are the triumphs within the poem; triumphs which are saddening in that they so seldom relate intimately to the poem's real concerns, but yet manifesting eye and ear such as few English poets have possessed.²

On the contrary, Tennyson's images, as has been observed, are not "saddening." Rather, they are among the preeminent "triumphs" in the Idylls, for the very reason that they do "relate intimately to the poem's real concerns." It is unfortunate that Ricks does not notice the crowning achievement of Tennyson's use of symbol in the Idylls of the King. The poet's light and shadow imagery serve as the major symbols which underscore the meaning

of the work, and very deliberately help unify the idylls as a whole. The "real concerns" of the Idylls deal with the ideals of faith and the temporal quality of the ideal because of the frailty of humanity. The poet illustrates a "Messiah" in terms of light, and yet, because Arthur is only a man, he can sustain the ideal world only for a short time. Still, Tennyson offers hope in the comfort that just as the sun must set--so it also will rise--and in every new day lies the possibility of a new ideal--a new king--a new Camelot.

Notes

¹Ricks, p. 264.

²Ricks, p. 274.
