Idylls of the King: Searching for Equilibrium in Victorian Society

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In the idyll, "The Last Tournament", Sir Tristram describes King Arthur and his court to his lover, Isolt, reporting how Arthur binds his knights with "inviolable vows, which flesh and blood perforce would violate."[454] While this statement can be interpreted as simply part of the tragic story of the doomed King Arthur, it captures the essence of the tension between morality, the "inviolable vows," and its repression of humanity, the "flesh and blood" that cannot maintain those vows. As in literature in general, this relationship expressed in Tennyson's poetry reflects the social discussions of the culture and time period in which it was produced. And as literature mirrors the ongoing dialogue within a society attempting to deal with conflicting ideas, it allows that society to come to a better understanding of itself. An examination of those discussions therefore offers a way to understand the dynamics of the social and political atmosphere within which that society functioned. *Idylls of the King*, a highly popular and influential Victorian collection of narrative poetry of Arthurian legend by Alfred Lord Tennyson, reflects the discussions of both morality and humanity that fascinated Victorian society. More specifically, Victorian society's discourses on those topics are exposed by Tennyson's treatment of his overly moral and severe character, King Arthur – especially in contrast to his portrayal of the more human and flawed Lancelot. An analysis of these ideas of morality and humanity as they are presented in Tennyson's text, supported by an examination of those concepts in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* written at the end of the Victorian era, reveals how *Idylls of the King* conveys morality as the repression of humanity. This analysis offers a useful commentary on the dual natures of Victorian society which ranged from fanatically moral on one end to animalistic and depraved on the other.

The portrayal of morality and humanity in Tennyson's text provides the context for the argument that morality entails the suppression of humanity. Consequently, these ideas must be defined in order to take a meaningful look at *Idylls of the King*'s treatment of morality and humanity in relation to Victorian society. Morality is defined as the social codes determining acceptable or ideal behavior. Humanity is defined as essentially what it means to be human or to refer simply to the human race rather than the usual definition of humanity as sympathy or kindness. Defining these concepts more specifically allows a more detailed and accurate examination of the relationship between morality and humanity in *Idylls of the King*.

Idylls of the King, published between 1856 and 1885 and written by Alfred Lord Tennyson – dubbed the Poet Laureate of England in 1850 – was incredibly popular in Victorian society, with the first volume selling over ten thousand copies in only the first week.[455] As such a popular and important literary work of the Victorian time period, *Idylls of the King* was both highly influential and reflective of that era's ideals. Though his work may not represent the opinions of all Victorians, the popularity of Tennyson's poetry suggests this text reflects widely shared in that society. On the surface, this collection of narrative poems recounts different aspects

[454] Alfred Tennyson, *Idylls of the King* (New York: New American Library, 2003), 250.
[455] Harold Bloom, *Alfred, Lord Tennyson* (Infobase Publishing, 2010), 4; John Erskine, ed. *Selections from Tennyson's Idylls of the King* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1912), xvii.

of the Arthurian legend. Nevertheless, a focused examination on how Tennyson portrays the conflicting ideas of morality and humanity leads to a more in-depth conclusion concerning their relationship and therefore their understanding by Victorian society.

Throughout *Idylls of the King*, Tennyson consistently depicts Arthur as an inhuman representation of morality, which suggests that the Victorian concept of morality is opposed to that of humanity. A great many passages explore both the morality and the lack of humanity of the excessively moral King Arthur throughout *Idylls of the King*, from "The Coming" to "The Passing of Arthur." The passage concerning Arthur's origins states that "…since his ways are sweet, and theirs are bestial, hold him less than man; and there be those who deem him more than man, and dream he dropt from heaven."[456] This quotation not only clearly separates Arthur from the rest of humanity, but also suggests that Arthur's behavior, mannerisms, or morality is what makes him inhumane. Furthermore, this description of Arthur reveals him to be more moral or "sweet" compared to his "bestial" subjects, and introduces a possible aura of divinity about Arthur that is only strengthened throughout Tennyson's idylls. So while this particular quote is indecisive concerning whether Arthur's morality makes him less or more than a man, what is clear is that Arthur is represented as both inhuman and as the incarnation of morality. And because his morality is the factor that separates him from the rest of humanity, Tennyson's consistent treatment of Arthur clearly establishes the argument that morality is counter to humanity.

This view of morality and humanity as conflicting concepts is strengthened by examples in later poems. In "Lancelot and Elaine," Guinevere's scornfully compares her husband, Arthur, as "the sun in heaven" to her lover, Lancelot, with "a touch of earth."[457] Tennyson's description of Arthur's quasi-divine perfection, or ideal morality as "the sun in heaven," is a direct contrast to Lancelot's less moral humanity – a relationship where morality is inversely proportional to humanity. Like Tennyson's earlier description, Arthur is once again a non-human tinged with a divinity that now is more explicitly Christ-like. This inhuman perfection is set in opposition to Lancelot's "touch of earth," a phrase suggesting the earthiness of Lancelot implies a certain crudity or impurity of his character. Therefore, this contrast to Lancelot's immorality only enhances the idea that Arthur, with his suggestion of divine inhumanness, is the definitive representation of morality.

Additionally, Guinevere ruefully describes Arthur as a "height to which I would not or I could not climb" and "that pure severity of perfect light," after her last encounter with Arthur following his discovery of her betrayal with Lancelot.[458] This second quotation depicts Arthur as so perfect and so pure that he is blinding to mere humans. This description of his purity by Tennyson through the words of the now worshipful Guinevere only reinforces Arthur's otherworldly, Christ-like divinity – especially as it brings to mind the biblical description of Jesus as "the way and the truth and the light."[459] Looking at the first quotation with this biblical reference in mind, Arthur is described as a height of morality to which humanity is unable to rise or a perfection that humanity rejects as alien – "would not." Therefore, Tennyson drives home the idea that Arthur is an inhuman paragon of virtue and morality – a being so perfect and moral that he is not human, lacking the "warmth" and core humanity of Lancelot. And as the Christ-like morality of Arthur is

[456] Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, 10.
[457] Ibid, 155.
[458] Ibid, 270.
[459] John 14:6 NIV.

the absence of Lancelot's humanity, *Idylls of the King* distinctly sets up the understanding of morality and humanity as conflicting concepts.

However, Tennyson not only portrays morality as counter to humanity, but also portrays Arthur's extreme morality as causing humanity's downfall. Tennyson represents Arthur as unwise (although tragically noble) for trying to project his moral and inhuman expectations on a humanity who cannot hope to actually rise to his level. Throughout this collection of poems, Arthur imposes many exacting moral ideals on both his wife and his knights. Arthur expects his knights "to break the heathen and uphold the Christ, to ride abroad redressing human wrongs…to lead sweet lives in purest chastity…teach high thought, and amiable words, and courtliness," to name only a few required values.[460] And Guinevere was meant to be like Arthur, a paragon of virtue, as well as the perfect wife that helped her husband uphold his "purpose and rejoice in [his] joy."[461] But Arthur's expectations were too much and, as a result of imposing these unachievable morals, everything in his world falls apart – Guinevere violates her marriage to her emotionally remote husband, Arthur, with the passionate Lancelot. Lancelot's betrayal of Arthur and his vows of knighthood is a fatal blow to Arthur's world; indeed none of Arthur's knights can live up to his expectations. Most notable among the failings of Arthur's knights are the betrayal of Arthur by "Mordred whom he left in charge of all, the traitor" who causes many other knights to forget "their troth and fealty" to Arthur, and Sir Bedivere's struggle requiring three tries to fulfill his dying lord's wishes to return Arthur's sword, Excalibur, to the Lady of the Lake.[462]

Clyde Ryals expresses this situation as Arthur's "failure…to project fully his will on his people," in his article "The Moral Paradox of the Hero in Idylls of the King," where Arthur's expectations, or morality, seem to be a yoke that none can bear.[463] The result is Arthur's ultimate failure. This idea that morality fails to modify humanity is supported throughout Tennyson's poetry. In "Lancelot and Elaine", Guinevere states that Arthur cares not for her as he is too busy "swearing men to vows impossible, to make them like himself" – or in other words to make humanity inhumanly moral.[464] In "Gareth and Lynette" a Seer tells Gareth, the future knight of the Round Table, that "the King will bind thee by such vows…no man can keep."[465] The vows or expectations Arthur has for his knights are spelled out more clearly in an address to Guinevere, where most simply he asks that his knights "serve as a model for the mighty world."[466] Therefore Arthur's required vows imposing morality on his knights are so unrealistic that "no man can keep" them. If this is true, then the failure of Arthur's moral expectations is an example of morality, attempting to refine humanity and, ultimately, failing. Furthermore, the difficulty of Arthur's vows can be viewed as arising from the fact that they go against natural instincts or humanity. Therefore, this attempt by morality to refine humanity can be viewed as morality repressing the essential humanity of those upon whom it is imposed.

In order to better understand Tennyson's presentation of morality as the repression of humanity, it is helpful to turn to another classic piece of Victorian literature. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a novella that was first published as a three-part series in 1899, at the end of the Victorian era.[467] Surprisingly, this work,

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[460] Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, 265.
[461] Ibid, 265.
[462] Ibid, 258, 264, 280.
[463] Clyde Ryals, "The Moral Paradox of the Hero in Idylls of the King." *ELH* 30, no. 1 (1963): 53-69, 67.
[464] Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, 155.
[465] Ibid, 27.
[466] Ibid, 265.
[467] Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2003), x.

detailing a fictitious expedition to the Belgian Congo, deals with the issues of morality and humanity in a fashion similar to Tennyson despite radical differences in subject matter.

Heart of Darkness examines the darkness in Conrad's definition of humanity and is therefore a window into the idea of morality as a repressive force on natural humanity. While navigating through the treacherous Congo River towards the ailing Kurtz, Conrad's protagonist, Marlowe, catches sight of a native village with its inhabitants all in an "incomprehensible frenzy."[468] In his description of the spectacle created by these natives, Marlowe clearly states the view of morality as a repression of humanity – "Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response."[469] This is a suggestion that even within he most civilized or "moral" of humans, like Conrad's gentleman Marlowe, there exists this darkness or wild humanity wanting to break free and join that "incomprehensible frenzy."[470] And as this wild humanity exists beneath the mask of civilization, civilization can be seen as a force repressing this humanity. Also, this passage introduces the idea that the concepts of morality and civilization are linked, an important connection that allows for the interpretation that morality is repressive of base humanity.

The next idea apparent in *Heart of Darkness*, central to the argument that morality and civilization are repressive of humanity, is the equating of restraint with morality. Daniel and Birgit Maier-Katkin, in their article "At the Heart of Darkness" critiquing the novella make the comment that, "the restraining impulses of civilization" are what keeps humans from becoming savages – that civilization represses animalistic human instincts.[471] Keeping this in mind, the next passage deals with the protagonist's amazement that the cannibal crewmen on Marlowe's vessel refrained from eating the other crewmembers despite their obvious hunger and ability to overcome them as they outnumbered the rest of the crew thirty to five.[472] "Restraint! I would just as soon have expected restraint from a hyena prowling amongst the corpses of a battlefield. But there was the fact facing me…"[473] Here Marlowe views the cannibals' resistance to their natural state of existence, as something extraordinarily moral. By putting all these ideas together, it is clear that restraint is portrayed as equivalent to morality, and morality is the force that stops humans from becoming "savages," or a repression of natural humanity.

Conrad's idea that morality is not just counter to humanity, but repressive of humanity, can readily be applied to Tennyson's poetry. Tennyson's greatest expression of restraint as morality appears during Arthur's speech to his adulterous wife, Guinevere, at the nunnery. By this time in the plot, Arthur's knights have uncovered Lancelot's affair with Guinevere, who ends up fleeing to a nunnery while Arthur is forced to go to battle against Lancelot who has fled to his holdings in France. Arthur, now aware of his wife's betrayal as well as the betrayal of his knights, arrives at the nunnery for a final confrontation with Guinevere. Throughout the entire encounter Arthur remains unfeeling, aloof, and restrained in a discussion of a subject that normally would be emotionally explosive. Instead of raging against his unfaithful wife who has helped bring about the doom of his kingdom, Arthur tells Guinevere to "think not that I come to urge thy crimes; I did not come to curse thee,

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[468] Ibid, 76.
[469] Ibid.
[470] Ibid.
[471] Maier-Katkin, Birgit, and Daniel Maier-Katkin. "At the Heart of Darkness: Crimes against Humanity and the Banality of Evil." *Human Rights Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (2004), 584-604.
[472] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 82.
[473] Ibid, 83.

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…all is past, the sin is sinn'd, and I, Lo, I forgive thee."[474] So while Arthur has been defined throughout *Idylls* as a representation of morality, this characterization is further enhanced by his superhuman restraint in this encounter.

In fact, Arthur explicitly refers to himself as an equal to God and a moral epitome of inhumanity when he states, "And all is past, the sin is sinn'd, and I, Lo, I forgive thee, as Eternal God Forgives!"[475] Not only is Arthur the perfectly restrained husband dismissing his wife's betrayal, but he forgives her as only "Eternal God Forgives".[476] So Arthur, the ethereal and non-human character totally representing morality, displays this morality through superhuman restraint. Therefore, through this portrayal, Tennyson conveys the ideas of restraint and morality as counter to humanity. Since this self-control is in direct opposition to normal human emotions, it suggests that morality restrains humanity. So it can be argued that Tennyson presents morality as not the highest expression of humanity, but rather as the repression of humanity. So while, on the surface, *Heart of Darkness* and *Idylls of the King* deal with very different subjects, they share similar discussions and ideas concerning the repression of humanity.

Norbert Elias' *The Civilizing Process* explores this same idea of morality, as a suppression of humanity. He states that over time, "the more animalic human activities were progressively thrust behind the scenes of people's communal social life and invested with feelings of shame."[477] This statement clearly expresses the same stance on morality, and civilization, as a repressive force demonstrated in both *Idylls of the* King and *Heart of Darkness*. Furthermore, the proposition that civilization has assigned shame to our natural humanity suggests a foundation for a commentary on the dual nature of Victorian society. Victorian society can be seen to have clear extremes, with the animalistic seedy side of society indeed being assigned shame by the opposite, restrictively moral side. Therefore, Elias suggests that the moral standards that had evolved by the Victorian era were a repression of the natural, "animalic," and shameful side of Victorian society.

In order to more directly apply this idea of morality's repression of humanity to Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, and by extension to Victorian society, it is necessary to explore how Tennyson represents these two extremes of morality and humanity. William Brashear in his article, "Tennyson's Tragic Vitalism," discusses how all civilizing ideals are an impossibility in Arthur's world, and how Tennyson's Arthur is imperfect because of his impossible perfection.[478] This concept of impossible perfection is reminiscent of Guinevere's discussion in "Lancelot and Elaine" where she contrasts Arthur and Lancelot, likening Arthur to the Christ-like being, or the "sun in heaven".[479] Even more explicitly, during her rant against her husband Arthur in the same passage, Guinevere states that, "the faultless King…is all fault who hath no fault at all."[480] Therefore Tennyson describes the ultimate paragon of virtue as so "faultless" that he is both impossible and undesirable.

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[474] Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, 267.
[475] Ibid.
[476] Ryals, "The Moral Paradox of the Hero in Idylls of the King," 66.
[477] Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: sociogenetic and psychogenetic investigations* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), 365.
[478] William R. Brashear, "Tennyson's Tragic Vitalism: "Idylls of the King"." *Victorian Poetry* 6, no. 1 (1968), 29-49.
[479] Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, 155.
[480] Ibid, 155.

Expanding upon this idea of imperfect perfection, Guinevere later touches upon the excessive morality of her husband after he has confronted and forgiven her at the nunnery. In reference to her "great and gentle lord, who wast, as in the conscience of a saint," Guinevere states that she, "half-despised the height to which I would not or I could not climb – I thought I could not breathe in that fine air, that pure severity of perfect light."[481] With this statement, Tennyson suggests that this extreme morality, this idealized civilization, this repression of humanity, is something either undesirable ("half-despised" and "would not…climb") or unrealistic ("could not breathe" and "could not climb") for Victorians.

The unrealistic morality suggested by these quotations might also imply that humanity, and by extension, Victorian society was just not worthy enough to reach that height or purest potential. At the beginning of the poem "The Passing of Arthur," Arthur states his regret that "the world is irredeemable" and as a result "all [his] realm reels back into the beast, and is no more."[482] This lament by Arthur describes that as a result of forcing his world to adhere to a level of morality they were not meant or able to achieve, a violent backslide to the other brutish extreme resulted. Sir Tristram describes this same concept to Isolt in "The Last Tournament" as, "the vow that binds too strictly snaps itself."[483] The conflict presented here by Tennyson concerning the struggle between morality and humanity was extremely relevant to the society of his time, as it clearly reflected the reality of Victorian society's dual nature, which ranged from the seedy and "shameful" to the exceptionally restricting and moral.

The most notorious expression of this squalid side of Victorian society was the thriving Victorian prostitution trade. Prostitution had become such a part of Victorian life that Parliament passed a series of Contagious Diseases Acts, beginning in 1864, in an attempt to regulate prostitution and limit the spread of the venereal diseases that increasingly plagued even the supposedly moral elite, such as noble gentlemen.[484] It had even become a tradition for upper-class Victorian men to gain sexual experience through encounters with prostitutes, and it was common for middle- and upper-class men to engage regularly in such activities – almost like an expected rite of passage for young Victorian men.[485]

Naturally, the espoused moral standards of the time frowned upon such practices. Significantly, it was the women prostitutes who were blamed for the behavior, leaving the men, even in law, innocent victims.[486] During that period there were even prostitutes, "dollymops," who supposedly worked as servants with the malicious intent to seduce and corrupt members of the household.[487] Publicly, however, prostitution was regarded as a great shame especially as it was "supported and upheld by men whose positions in society should afford a guarantee against a morality so lax," and was considered a pollution of the city.[488]

Furthermore, while the Industrial Revolution resulted in great scientific and technological advancement, it also resulted in marked degradation of the living

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[481] Ibid, 270.
[482] Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, 272; Ryals, "The Moral Paradox of the Hero in Idylls of the King," 67.
[483] Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, 249.
[484] Belinda Brooks-Gordon, *The price of sex: prostitution, policy, and society*. : (Taylor & Francis, 2006), 7.
[485] Ibid, 6.
[486] Ibid, 7.
[487] Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: women, class, and the state*. : (Cambridge University Press, 1982), 34.
[488] Ibid, 34.

conditions of the lower classes of Victorian society. The Industrial Revolution was an important step towards modern comforts and technology, and gave birth to new and unlimited energy sources, such as the steam engine, as well as the idyllic Crystal Palace.[489] However, in a sanitation report on the newly industrial Manchester, an investigator stated that there were "everywhere heaps of debris, refuse, and offal; standing pools for gutters, and a stench, which alone would make it impossible for a human being in any degree civilized to live in such a district."[490] Expanding on the descriptions of inhumane living conditions, the famous Florence Nightengale observed that, "A large number of poor cottages have been recently condemned as 'unfit for human habitation,' but though 'unfit' many are still 'inhabited,' from lack of other accommodation."[491] So despite all the positive scientific advances, the lower classes of Victorian society were simultaneously reduced to subhuman conditions, almost to the state of animals.

As presented in *Heart of Darkness*, the firsthand impressions of imperialism can be likened to the masks of civilization which, stripped away, reveal the violent and dark aspects of humanity. Before Marlowe begins telling the story of his trip down the Congo, he remarks that conquerors of old, like the imperialists, "grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind."[492] This description of the civilizing imperialists paints a very different picture from that of the composed English gentlemen like Kurtz and Marlowe at the beginning of the novel. More specifically, Kurtz is described as becoming a savage after being "disconnected…from the restraining impulses of civilization."[493] Hence, imperialism has removed the restraining forces on humanity, and as a result Kurtz regresses completely into an animalistic being.

This new characterization of the imperialists as savage is only emphasized by the natives of Canton who described the invading imperialists as, "wild beasts, with dispositions more fierce than the tiger or wolf, and natures more greedy than anacondas or swine. These people having long steadily devoured all the western barbarians, and like demons of the night, they now suddenly exalt themselves here."[494] In this description all the repressive forces of civilization, and thus of morality, have evidently been lifted, leaving base humanity unrestrained and running free to become perverted with animalistic violence. Considering these two accounts together, though *Heart of Darkness* is fictional and both accounts are naturally biased, they both offer a counter view that reflects the reversion from morality to the appalling and violent human instincts that perhaps lurked underneath the morally repressive standards of Victorian society.

On the other highly moral and restrictive side of Victorian society, the civilized ideals or social codes set by the fashionable and most respected segments of society created a very repressive environment. "Moralistic literature" such as conduct and etiquette books were extremely influential and educated Victorians on how to properly "conceal real feelings and to maintain an appropriate appearance

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[489] Pat Hudson, *The Industrial Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 23; Hermione Hobhouse, *The Crystal Palace and the Great Exhibition* (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 44.
[490] Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1892).
[491] Lucy Seymer ed., *Selected Writings of Florence Nightengale* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1954).
[492] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 41.
[493] Birgit, and Daniel Maier-Katkin. "At the Heart of Darkness: Crimes against Humanity and the Banality of Evil," 589.
[494] Eva Tappan, *China, Japan, and the Islands of the Pacific*. Vol. 1 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914).

and gentility."[495] However, this complete suppression of "animalic" humanity in order to maintain the acceptable appearance of morality was unrealistic. As Norbert Elias states, "the effort required to behave "correctly" within becomes so great…[that it] produces such collisions with social reality."[496] These unrealistic moral expectations promoted in Victorian society, like Arthur's ideals in *Idylls of the King*, perhaps resulted in the growth of this other seedy side of society. The failure of morality to completely rein in base humanity led instead to the creation of animalistic and socially unacceptable outlets such as prostitution and the violence of imperialism.

These two very conflicting and opposite aspects of Victorian society, from the base and depraved (such as the prostitution trade, the subhuman conditions that resulted from the industrial revolution, and the violent nature of imperialism) to the repressive mask of strict social codes, are reflected in Tennyson's discussion of morality as a force repressive of base humanity. As stated earlier, the Victorian's extreme social codes were in truth as much a failure as were Arthur's ideals of knighthood and civilized behavior, as evidenced by the thriving dark side of Victorian society – at least in the sense that these social codes were unable to make everyone "good". When Guinevere is offered the ultimate dilemma of choosing between the human Lancelot with his natural human instincts and the inhuman and emotionally repressive Arthur, *Idylls of the King* becomes a reflective commentary on the difficulty in Victorian society of finding a realistic and genuine balance between extremes.

Tennyson also emphasizes the need for finding the balance between the extremes of morality and humanity through the fool, Dragonet, in his poem "The Last Tournament." After Sir Tristram has already won the tournament, Dragonet implies that King Arthur "conceits himself as God that he can make figs out of thistles, silk from bristles, milk from burning spurge, honey from hornet-combs, and men from beasts."[497] While at first glance this statement merely reinforces the argument that the divine Arthur imposes morals to repress the bestial nature of humanity, it conveys more than that. The phrase "conceits himself as God" suggests that it is profoundly wrong for Arthur to style himself as a divine being in order to alter the natures of men. Consequently, if the problem is that the human Arthur is taking on the essence of the inhuman, then the notion of humanity completely rejecting itself to become entirely the other moral extreme is also presented as wrong. Therefore, Tennyson rejects fanaticism of any extreme, suggesting the desirability of discovering a realistic and proper balance in Victorian society.

Tennyson's own political beliefs demonstrate the importance he attached to this very issue of finding the truthful state or balance between the extremes explored with the issues of morality and humanity in *Idylls of the King*. Tennyson was generally considered a conservative, however he also adhered to "liberal ideologies" and was described as "either an unconvincing liberal or an unconscious conservative."[498] In offering an explanation of the fact that Tennyson was such a politically contradictory man, Cornelia Pearsall, in her work *Tennyson's Rapture*, conjectures that this contradiction was due to Tennyson's affiliation with the now extinct Whig Party. The Whig Party was described as consisting of "democratic aristocrat[s]," and therefore embodied a balance between conservatism and

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[495] Gillian Bendelow and Simon Williams, *Emotions in social life: critical themes and contemporary issues*. (Psychology Press, 1998), 71.
[496] Norbert, *The Civilizing Process: sociogenetic and psychogenetic investigations*, 367-368.
[497] Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, 241; Ryals, "The Moral Paradox of the Hero in Idylls of the King," 64.
[498] Cornelia Pearsall, *Tennyson's rapture: transformation in the Victorian dramatic monologue* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 9, 12, 38.

liberalism.[499] This embracing of two political extremes and from them creating a balance reveals an important aspect of Tennyson's life in relation to his ideals and poetry.

Furthermore, in his dedication for *Idylls of the King,* where he expounds upon the greatness of the late Prince Consort Albert, Tennyson remarks on Albert's similar political balance. Tennyson's idealized and "all-accomplished" prince, like himself, did "not sway to this faction or to that; not [make] his high place the lawless perch of winged ambitions, nor a vantage-ground for pleasure."[500] Therefore, the fact that Tennyson's real life ideal man, or realistic King Arthur, was a man who also remained in the middle of political extremes suggests that a balanced equilibrium not given way to extremism or fanaticism was Tennyson's own ideal.

This political balance is most beautifully summed up by the account of Tennyson's elevation to a peerage in 1884. Instead of joining either political party after his elevation, he sat on the middle cross benches to show his lack of affiliation.[501] This symbolic gesture of sitting in the middle between conservatism and liberalism can be connected to the idea of finding the middle ground between the extremes: morality and restraint versus humanity and lack of restraint. Therefore it can be suggested that Tennyson infused his own political beliefs and took on the dual nature of Victorian society in his discussion of morality and humanity in *Idylls of the King*.

Tennyson's dedication to the late Prince Albert also more explicitly encourages the same balance between social extremes that he demonstrated in his political ideologies. Specifically, Tennyson applauds Prince Albert's ability to find the perfect equilibrium between repressive morality and natural humanity, stating, "what sublime repression of himself, and in what limits."[502] Here Tennyson suggests that while the ideal Albert imposed moral restrictions upon himself, he did so with prudent moderation. The idealized balance outlined in the dedication, combined with his political balance, drives home Tennyson's presentation of morality as the repression of humanity while at the same time promoting moderation rather than fanaticism in all facets of life.

Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* conveys morality and humanity as conflicting concepts in the story of the struggle between his inhuman moral Arthur and his less moral and human Lancelot, and explores the idea that morality is the repression of natural or even bestial humanity. The literary tension created by the exploration of these two extremes in Arthur's world thus offers a commentary on the dual natures of Victorian society. The extremes of Victorian society encompassed both overly repressive moral social codes and expressions of animalistic humanity revealed by prostitution, the Industrial Revolution, and imperialism. Finally, a look at Tennyson's own political beliefs and practices suggests his belief in the importance and difficulty of finding the balancing point between two vastly contrasting stances – a rejection of the fanaticism represented by the two extremes existing in the Victorian society during the time in which he lived and wrote that continues to be relevant for today's society.

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[499] Ibid, 39.
[500] Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, 3.
[501] Pearsall, *Tennyson's rapture: transformation in the Victorian dramatic monologue*, 39.
[502] Ibid, 3.