

# Ontological Concerns in Charles Dickens's "The Ivy Green" and Odysseus Elytis' "The Mad Pomegranate Tree": A Comparison

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## Abstract

This paper compares the existential problems addressed in Charles Dickens' poem "The Ivy Green" and the Greek poet Odysseus Elytis' poem "The Mad Pomegranate Tree." While it highlights Dickens' portrayal of the theme of death, contrasted with Elytis' rapture at the variegated functions and the youthfulness of the tree, it also underlines how the lithesome movement of the Ivy green upon the dead awakens in us an understanding of the inevitable.

**[Key words:** ontological, mortality, existence]

This paper makes a comparative study of Charles Dickens's poem "The Ivy Green," from *The Pickwick Papers* (1837) and the Greek poet Odysseus Elytis' poem "The Mad Pomegranate Tree," in order to highlight how the poets' portrayal of the plants in question addresses deep-rooted ontological concerns. A study of the nature of existence, ontology is, as the Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy defines, "inquiry into, or theory of, being *qua* being" (401). In a sylvan, arboreal backdrop, both poets examine different philosophical issues and the problem of human existence. However, the theme of mortality in Dickens' poem is more pronounced, and is contrasted with the variegated functions of the pomegranate tree. In Dickens' hand, the brilliant Ivy green symbolizes the dispenser of death, in contrast with the milder, romantic pictures of the pomegranate tree in Elytis'. What "The Ivy Green" shows is the mortality of all, stressing on the fact of death, which is no respecter of persons. But this finds a pleasanter counterpoint in Elytis' description of the "mad" pomegranate tree that "leaps in the light," "quivers with foliage," "puts the light in their verdant baskets," "combats the cloudy skies of the world," "seizes on the run a horse's mane of a hundred lashes," "cries out the new hope now dawning," "creaks the rigging, aloft in the lucid air," "shatters with light the demon's tempests," "hastily unfastens the silk apparel of day," and "opens its wings on the breast of things / On the breast of our deepest dreams" (21, 22).

The Ivy green is portrayed against a panorama of mortality. The ineluctable impermanence of things, which points at the fact of death, is not so much underplayed by dismissing it as mortality per se, but it chastens us to an understanding that we *are*

mortal. Everything that is discussed in the poem asseverates the speaker's position that the inescapability of the fact of death must be acknowledged. On that score, it is interesting to see that the Ivy green itself is portrayed as immortal, subjecting everything to its fatal fold. Although it looks, apparently, as paradoxical, it evermore underlines the speaker's ascription of permanence to the Ivy green, in that it does not die since it goes on fattening itself on the dead. To put it simply, since the fact of death never ends, and people, palaces and things die and cease to be, the Ivy green never runs short of its food. It, therefore, suggests that since the fact of mortality will never come to an end, the Ivy green will continue to live while all else will die.

In the schema of such a classic counterpoint, Dickens starts portraying the Ivy green by attributing delicate features to it. The delicacy of the plant, coupled with its capriciousness is intended to drive the point home, that is, situating the reader in a chiaroscuro of life and death:

Oh, a dainty plant is the Ivy green,  
That creepeth o'er ruins old!  
Of right choice food are his meals, I ween,  
In his cell so lone and cold.  
The wall must be crumbled, the stone decayed,  
To pleasure his dainty whim:  
And the mouldering dust that years have made  
Is a merry meal for him.  
Creeping where no life is seen,  
A rare old plant is the Ivy green (Dickens, "The Ivy Green," 1-10).

In exciting an obvious paradox by juxtaposing the "dainty" plant with a macabre imagery, Dickens appropriates the setting in an opportune moment, and the reader is bewildered by the profundity of such significations. The use of such expressions like "ruins," "lone and cold," "crumbled," "decayed," "mouldering dust" force the reader to conjure up pictures of depreciation and mortality, so masterly effected by the "dainty whim" of the Ivy green. "Ruins old" is a metaphor for impermanence, but far from being a gratuitous description of morbidity, it creates a locale for exposing the futility of man's hauteur. Dickens' employment of the word "dainty" for the plant highlights an unusual collocation since the word is primarily attributed with feminine grace, whereas the Ivy green is masculine. Thus, as manifest in the action of the plant, there is a blend of its feminine gracefulness that runs in consonance with its awful majesty and grandeur. The underlying philosophical questions that beset the reader relates to an instantaneous association with the truths of life which must be directly faced with.

The perspicacity in Dickens' argument is a pointer to the fact that the Ivy's reveling in the "merry meal" is but a general reference to the fact of decay and death, and it does not exclusively relate to any particular object or man. The intricate, surreptitious

embrace of the Ivy green: "Creeping where no life is seen" heightens the pictures of loneliness and desolation, presented through an image of consumption by the plant. It is also important to see that the Ivy green dominates the dead, and not the living. Dickens' ontological concerns, thus, relate to representing the ultimate reality confronting man insofar as it exacts a realization of the meaning of our existence.

The rarity of the Ivy green in combining superb gracefulness and unfailing administration of its actions upon the dead is further underscored in the second stanza where his act of befriending "the huge Oak Tree" raises exciting philosophical deliberations:

How closely he twineth, how tight he clings,  
To his friend the huge Oak Tree!  
And sliely he traileth along the ground,  
And his leaves he gently waves,  
As he joyously hugs and crawleth round  
The rich mould of dead men's graves.

Creeping where grim death has been,

A rare old plant is the Ivy green (Dickens, "The Ivy Green," 13-20).

The poet says that the Ivy green moves very fast; it has no wings; and it has a staunch old heart. But its act of closely twining and tightly cling the huge Oak Tree is a metaphor for the cold embrace of death. The Oak Tree, which symbolizes longevity, is very much subject to decay and death, as everything else is. So the firm grasp of the Ivy green hints at the fact that the Oak shall also be the Ivy's "merry meal." This reminds the reader of the lines in James Shirley's poem, "Death the Leveller": "Death lays his icy hand on kings: / Sceptre and Crown / Must tumble down, / And in the dust be equal made / With the poor crooked scythe and spade" (4-8). The Ivy green's fascination for the dead since it "joyously hugs and crawleth round / The rich mould of dead men's graves" is not what the poet intends to convey by glorifying its predilection for the morbid, or its sinister attraction to the dead, but a whole issue of ontological questions that pertain to the nature and meaning of our existence. Time and again, Dickens focuses on the fact of mortality that impinges on the stated objective of the poem, and reminds us of the "grim death," while leavening the intensity of the bleakness by aesthetic representations of the beauty of the Ivy green.

Dickens captures the movement of the Ivy green in a triad of absences: "Creeping where no life is seen," "Creeping where grim death has been," and "Creeping on, where time has been." By the use of the words: "stout," "brave," and "old," the poet lauds the Ivy for its unfading, verdant green, which is not subject to the vagaries of time, or to death. The poet beautifully describes its deathlessness in the following lines:

Whole ages have fled and their works decayed,

And nations have scattered been;  
 But the stout old Ivy shall never fade,  
 From its hale and hearty green (Dickens, "The Ivy Green," 21-24).

The reference to the cell of the Ivy, which is "so lone and cold," is again reinforced by alluding to "its lonely days," even though it is stout, hale and hearty, and brave. This description dismisses any idea of foreclosure of the fact of mortality from which the Ivy is immune. However, it has its lonely days too. But that which simply, in botanical terms, keeps it alive is the necessary substance it gets from ramshackle, "stateliest building": "For the stateliest building man can raise, / Is the Ivy's food at last." The expression, "stateliest building" suggests inevitable subjection of our proudest possessions to the might of death. However, Dickens does not glorify death, nor does he revel in macabre, necrophiliac descriptions. The poet's singular purpose lies in laying bare the truth of human existence obfuscated by a veneer of pride. The Ivy is, indeed, a study in what it means to celebrate life.

When we read Odysseus' poem "The Mad Pomegranate Tree," we feel that the poet expects answers in the positive to all the questions he asks about the pomegranate tree. The glee and abandon captured in the first few lines suggest that the speaker has found in the tree an object into which he could direct his ecstasy. In what would otherwise have been a mere glorification of the natural beauties, or the pomegranate tree, in particular, is invested with a symbolic import, mirroring the speaker's inner self. The graceful movement of the tree, with all its zest, likens it with the characteristics of youth, and further, it highlights a set of distinctive references to its feminineness. The expressions: "Light," "laughter," "wilfulness," and "triumph," ascribed to the tree, underscore its fervour that culminates in triumph, although "in a shiver." The tree's overt youthfulness emblazoned by its grit in "Raising high its colours," does also hint at its strength to brace the might of the "south wind." In essence, the poet highlights an existential concern that directly relates to man's capacity to face the onslaught of vicissitudes.

Describing the briskness of the pomegranate tree in its tenderness, Elytis pictures its pranks and playfulness, which evince a significant identification of the selfsame youthfulness of the poet with the tree's aesthetic mischief:

On plains where the naked girls awake,  
 Where they harvest clover with their light brown arms  
 Roaming round the borders of their dreams—tell me, is it the mad  
 pomegranate tree,  
 Unsuspecting, that puts the light in their verdant baskets  
 That floods their names with the singing of birds—tell me  
 Is it the mad pomegranate tree that combats the cloudy skies of the  
 world? (Elytis, "The Mad Pomegranate Tree," 8-15).

The sensuous descriptions in the lines that underline the pomegranate tree's madness, is also buttressed by its capacity to combat "the cloudy skies of the world." This is an assertion of its determination to face the adversities, suggested earlier in a reference to the "west wind." The poet's repeated use of the adjective "mad," for the pomegranate tree, intrigues the reader, but it is clear that it is not used in any pejorative sense. Madness, being a defining characteristic of the pomegranate tree, generates positive connotations. Thus, this delirious characteristic of the tree is a powerful camouflage of what goes within the poet. Again, Elytis' unreserved ascription of jealousy to the pomegranate tree seems to frustrate the tree's built-in merits, but it is qualified by the possibilities of "the new hope now dawning." What ennobles the tree is its capacity to insulate it from sadness:

On the day that it adorns itself in jealousy with seven kinds of feathers,  
Girding the eternal sun with a thousand blinding prisms  
Tell me, is it the mad pomegranate tree  
That seizes on the run a horse's mane of a hundred lashes,  
Never sad and never grumbling—tell me is it the mad pomegranate tree  
That cries out the new hope now dawning? (Elytis, "The Mad Pomegranate Tree,"  
16-21).

The exquisite images: "that it adorns itself in jealousy with seven kinds of feathers," "Girding the eternal sun with a thousand blinding prisms," and seizing on the run "a horse's mane of a hundred lashes" are quite flabbergasting indeed; yet they invoke subtle significations of the tree's inherent power. One after another, Elytis unfolds the varied capabilities of the tree that serve only to heighten the tree's 'madness.' The poet's fancied curiosity as to the veracity of the tree's multifarious actions is too obvious to be answered in the negative, that is, the eagerness that whether what he thinks of the pomegranate tree is right, is a clear indication of the poet's appreciation of the tree's variedness. The poet's bemused interrogation is an acknowledgement of the tree's splendour. Again, when the pomegranate tree is pictured in terms of "waving in the distance, / Fluttering a handkerchief of leaves of cool flame," it is invested with a nautical significance in that it "creaks the rigging aloft in the lucid air." The images of "a thousand ships and more" and "unscented shores" vis-à-vis the tree's gestures of "waving in the distance" and "fluttering a handkerchief" underline a note of jubilation and optimism in the tree that characterizes evermore the necessity of finding meaning in a world or time fraught with dangers. The nature of human existence dealt with in the expressions repeatedly underline this necessity. In the following lines, Elytis highlights again the resolve of the tree in resisting perils:

High as can be, with the blue bunch of grapes that flares and celebrates  
Arrogant, full of danger—tell me, is it the mad pomegranate tree  
That shatters with light the demon's tempests in the middle of the world

That spreads far as can be the saffron ruffle of day  
 Richly embroidered with scattered songs—tell me, is it the mad  
     pomegranate tree  
 That hastily unfastens the silk apparel of day? (Elytis, "The Mad Pomegranate  
 Tree," 28-34).

The pomegranate tree shatters "the demon's tempests in the middle of the world," and it is juxtaposed with the tree's spreading of "the saffron ruffle of day." This picture of contrast presents the systemic, built-in strength of the tree in combating the adversities. Throughout the poem, the pomegranate tree exudes brilliance, an enviable audacity in braving the might of perils or problems that preclude its fullest efflorescence or manifestation. Further, the poet blends a touch of playfulness with the tree's strength, and heightens a spectacular combination of softness and grit, characteristic of the pomegranate tree in question. The images like "the saffron ruffle of day" and "the silk apparel of day" are employed by the poet to highlight the aspects of colour and touch in relation to the day. Of course, whatever functions the poet ascribes to the pomegranate tree, presenting them through exquisite images and poetic devices, he finds in the tree reflections of his own self. But it has wider significance since it relates to all of us at the backdrop of a general human predicament.

In the last stanza of the poem, Elytis' portrayal of the pomegranate tree: "that which plays, that which rages, that which can entice" is summarized by referring to a very significant contribution of the pomegranate tree to our happiness: "that which opens its wings on the breast of things / On the breast of our deepest dreams" (39-40). The horror underlying the expressions such as "threats" and "evil black darkness" contrasts with the picture of "intoxicating birds," and this again highlights the tree's strength and ardour in braving a world fraught with "evil black darkness." As Bruce Merry writes, the poem is "a pageant of delirium battling evil." (124). The ability of the pomegranate tree to open its wings "on the breast of things / On the breast of our deepest dreams" is perhaps the tree's most exclusive function that captivates the poet. The act or the fact of opening "its wings" is a symbol of hope, assurance and happiness that the pomegranate tree accords to us, who are battered by "the demon's tempests in the middle of the world." The pomegranate tree's resistance of dangers asseverates its determination and fortitude, and this goes concurrent with the tree's innate gracefulness. The madness of the tree is an affirmation of its capacity of resistance.

A comparative study of the ontological issues taken up by the poets, in the portrayal of the Ivy green and the pomegranate tree, highlights the poets' deep concern with the problems of human existence. The pictures of apparent morbidity in Dickens' poem are contrasted with the pleasanter descriptions of the pomegranate tree in *Odysseus'*. The profundity of the messages conveyed in the poems effect a behavioural overhauling in us in order that we might understand the true nature of things.

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