**IN MEMORIAM**

- ALFRED LORD TENNYSON

**ABOUT THE POET**

**Alfred, Lord Tennyson,** in full**Alfred Tennyson, 1st Baron Tennyson of Aldworth and Freshwater** born on [August](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/August) 6, 1809, Somersby, Lincolnshire, England. He is regarded as the chief representative of the Victorian age in [poetry](https://www.britannica.com/art/poetry).

Tennyson was hailed as the greatest of English poets and was awarded numerous honors; he received an honorary degree from Oxford University in 1885 and was offered the rectorship of Glasgow University. In 1883, he was raised to the peerage by Queen Victoria and was thereafter known as Baron Tennyson of Aldworth. He was the first Englishman to be granted such a high rank solely for literary distinction. Among his friends Tennyson counted such noteworthy people as Albert, the Prince Consort, W. E. Gladstone, the prime minister, Thomas Carlyle, the historian, and Edward FitzGerald, the poet.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson was the most highly regarded poet of his period and the most widely read of all English poets. The quality of his work varied greatly, and much that he wrote is of little interest today, for he included in his poetry themes and subjects that were of intense interest only to the Victorians. Tennyson's thought was often shallow and dealt with matters of fleeting significance, but his technical skill and prosody were unsurpassed. Perhaps the most perceptive evaluation of his work is embodied in Tennyson's own remark to Carlyle:

I don't think that since Shakespeare there has been such a master of the English language as I — to be sure, I have nothing to say.

In 1832 Tennyson published another volume of his poems (dated 1833), including “The Lotos-Eaters,” “The Palace of Art,” and “The Lady of Shalott.”

**ABOUT THE POEM**

**The** full title of the poem is “**In Memoriam A.H.H”.** It is a poem by [Alfred, Lord Tennyson](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alfred-Lord-Tennyson), written between the years 1833 and 1850 and published anonymously in 1850. Consisting of 131 sections, a prologue, and an epilogue, this chiefly elegiac work examines the different stages of Tennyson’s period of mourning over the death of his close friend [Arthur Henry Hallam](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Arthur-Henry-Hallam). In Memoriam reflects the Victorian struggle to [reconcile](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reconcile) traditional religious faith with the emerging theories of [evolution](https://www.britannica.com/science/evolution-scientific-theory) and modern geology. The verses show the development over three years of the poet’s acceptance and understanding of his friend’s death and conclude with an epilogue, a happy marriage song on the occasion of the wedding of the poet’s sister Cecilia.

**COMMENTARY**

Tennyson wrote “In Memoriam” after he learned that his beloved friend Arthur Henry Hallam had died suddenly and unexpectedly of a fever at the age of 22. Hallam was not only the poet’s closest friend and confidante, but also the fiance of his sister. After learning of Hallam’s death, Tennyson was overwhelmed with doubts about the meaning of life and the significance of man’s existence. He composed the short poems that comprise “In Memoriam” over the course of seventeen years (1833-1849) with no intention of weaving them together, though he ultimately published them as a single lengthy poem in 1850.

“In Memoriam” was intended as an elegy, or a poem in memory and praise of one who has died. As such, it contains all of the elements of a traditional pastoral elegy such as Milton’s “Lycidas,” including ceremonial mourning for the dead, praise of his virtues, and consolation for his loss. Moreover, all statements by the speaker can be understood as personal statements by the poet himself. Like most elegies, the “In Memoriam” poem begins with expressions of sorrow and grief, followed by the poet’s recollection of a happy past spent with the individual he is now mourning. These fond recollections lead the poet to question the powers in the universe that could allow a good person to die, which gives way to more general reflections on the meaning of life. Eventually, the poet’s attitude shifts from grief to resignation. Finally, in the climax, he realizes that his friend is not lost forever but survives in another, higher form. The poem closes with a celebration of this transcendent survival.

“In Memoriam” ends with an epithalamion, or wedding poem, celebrating the marriage of Tennyson’s sister Cecilia to Edmund Lushington in 1842. The poet suggests that their marriage will lead to the birth of a child who will serve as a closer link between Tennyson’s generation and the “crowning race.” This birth also represents new life after the death of Hallam, and hints at a greater, cosmic purpose, which Tennyson vaguely describes as “One far-off divine event / To which the whole creation moves.”

**Canto I**

I held it truth, with him who sings

   To one clear harp in divers tones,

   That men may rise on stepping-stones

Of their dead selves to higher things.

But who shall so forecast the years

   And find in loss a gain to match?

   Or reach a hand thro' time to catch

The far-off interest of tears?

Let Love clasp Grief lest both be drown'd,

   Let darkness keep her raven gloss:

   Ah, sweeter to be drunk with loss,

To dance with death, to beat the ground,

Than that the victor Hours should scorn

   The long result of love, and boast,

   `Behold the man that loved and lost,

But all he was is overworn.'

Tennyson once believed that men would rise "on stepping stones" (little by little) from death to become something more. He believed this along with believing in God, whom he presents in the [image](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/imagery.html) of someone singing to one harp with many voices. But now Tennyson is finding it difficult to find hope in the dark times. It is hard to contemplate the reality of loss and find any gain within it. His grief is too much. Plus, people can't transcend time and cut out the grief in between to see what will happen. Instead, the speaker suggests that we mix love and grief. It's better, he argues, to be all dark and intoxicated with grief than to let time win and gloat that the man who loved and lost just ended up worn out by it all. We can say Tennyson is struggling with the saying, "It's better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all."

The poet uses personification in the lines “Let Love clasp Grief lest both be drown’d”.

**Canto II**

Old Yew, which graspest at the stones

   That name the under-lying dead,

   Thy fibres net the dreamless head,

Thy roots are wrapt about the bones.

The seasons bring the flower again,

   And bring the firstling to the flock;

   And in the dusk of thee, the clock

Beats out the little lives of men.

O, not for thee the glow, the bloom,

   Who changest not in any gale,

   Nor branding summer suns avail

To touch thy thousand years of gloom:

And gazing on thee, sullen tree,

   Sick for thy stubborn hardihood,

   I seem to fail from out my blood

And grow incorporate into thee.

Tennyson now addresses an old yew tree that grows over some headstones. Its roots are wrapping around the dead man's head and bones. The seasons will allow the tree to flower again, while the clock counts the hours of puny men. There's a [juxtaposition](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/juxtaposition.html) between the longer natural cycles of the tree and the shorter years of men. Tennyson is emphasizing how tiny mere mortals are in the face of not only God, but also nature. Not even the wind or the sun can do much damage to the tree, which will live for a thousand years. Now Tennyson's using [apostrophe](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/apostrophe.html) to address the tree, speaking directly to it with the super-dramatic Victorian "O” and personifying it by calling it "sullen." This is a great example of [pathetic fallacy](https://www.shmoop.com/porphyrias-lover/storm-symbol.html), where a writer describes the outside world in a way that reflects his/her own inner mood. A tree being "sullen" or "stubborn," mirrors Tennyson being sad over his friend's death. He's grieving so much that he loses the sense of himself and imagines growing bodiless ("incorporate") into the tree, becoming one with the tree.

**Canto III**

O Sorrow, cruel fellowship,

   O Priestess in the vaults of Death,

   O sweet and bitter in a breath,

What whispers from thy lying lip?

'The stars,' she whispers, `blindly run;

   A web is wov'n across the sky;

   From out waste places comes a cry,

And murmurs from the dying sun:

'And all the phantom, Nature, stands—

   With all the music in her tone,

   A hollow echo of my own,—

A hollow form with empty hands.'

And shall I take a thing so blind,

   Embrace her as my natural good;

   Or crush her, like a vice of blood,

Upon the threshold of the mind?

Tennyson characterizes her as a lying "priestess" of death. She offers the speaker fellowship that is cruel, and sweetness and bitterness in the same breath. She's also telling him that the stars move "blindly," not because of any purpose. He continues with Sorrow's statement that Nature is a "phantom" that her music is just a “hollow echo” of Sorrow's, and that she has "empty hands". Sorrow is trying to get him to believe there's nothing guiding the universe and there is no grand purpose to life. Tennyson asks himself if he should give in to Sorrow, or if he should instead "crush her" as Sorrow enters his mind.

Tennyson [personifies](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/personification.html) sorrow and again uses [apostrophe](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/apostrophe.html) as he addresses her as priestess of death who whispers lies. The poet uses oxymoron where poets calls sorrow “O sweet and bitter in a breath” (two opposite ideas in side by side)

**Canto IV**

To Sleep I give my powers away;

   My will is bondsman to the dark;

   I sit within a helmless bark,

And with my heart I muse and say:

O heart, how fares it with thee now,

   That thou should'st fail from thy desire,

   Who scarcely darest to inquire,

'What is it makes me beat so low?'

Something it is which thou hast lost,

   Some pleasure from thine early years.

   Break, thou deep vase of chilling tears,

That grief hath shaken into frost!

Such clouds of nameless trouble cross

   All night below the darken'd eyes;

   With morning wakes the will, and cries,

'Thou shalt not be the fool of loss.'

So the poet decides to sleep, which is a way to get away from these feelings. Now Tennyson's talking to his heart (literary device - [personification](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/personification.html)). His heart doesn't know what it's missing, and doesn't know why it's not beating as strongly as it once did. The loss of his friend, we find out, happened many years prior to the time period in the poem. He wants to be able to cry about this, but his tears are locked in a "deep vase" that has been frozen. When morning comes and he wakes up and his willpower takes over, he doesn't want to play the fool for his feelings of grief.

**Canto V**

I sometimes hold it half a sin

   To put in words the grief I feel;

   For words, like Nature, half reveal

And half conceal the Soul within.

But, for the unquiet heart and brain,

   A use in measured language lies;

   The sad mechanic exercise,

Like dull narcotics, numbing pain.

In words, like weeds, I'll wrap me o'er,

   Like coarsest clothes against the cold:

   But that large grief which these enfold

Is given in outline and no more.

He considers it a sin to write about his grief, because words can't really convey the Truth of what he's feeling because it “half conceal the soul within”. Writing poetry gives him some relief from the pain. He's comparing the "mechanic exercise," or precision involved in writing poetry, that is, "measured language", to the feeling you get when using narcotics. It's taking his mind off things. So, he's going to wrap himself in words like a set of clothes that will protect him from the cold. He's only going to be able to give an outline of his true grief in words because it is difficult to convey in its entirety.

In line “In words, like weeds, I'll wrap me o'er” poet uses simile to compare himself to a weed and he will wrap himself around the writings to protect from the grief or cold.

**Canto VI**

One writes, that `Other friends remain,'

   That `Loss is common to the race'—

   And common is the commonplace,

And vacant chaff well meant for grain.

That loss is common would not make

   My own less bitter, rather more:

   Too common! Never morning wore

To evening, but some heart did break.

O father, wheresoe'er thou be,

   Who pledgest now thy gallant son;

   A shot, ere half thy draught be done,

Hath still'd the life that beat from thee.

O mother, praying God will save

   Thy sailor,—while thy head is bow'd,

   His heavy-shotted hammock-shroud

Drops in his vast and wandering grave.

Ye know no more than I who wrought

   At that last hour to please him well;

   Who mused on all I had to tell,

And something written, something thought;

Expecting still his advent home;

   And ever met him on his way

   With wishes, thinking, `here to-day,'

Or `here to-morrow will he come.'

O somewhere, meek, unconscious dove,

   That sittest ranging golden hair;

   And glad to find thyself so fair,

Poor child, that waitest for thy love!

For now her father's chimney glows

   In expectation of a guest;

   And thinking `this will please him best,'

She takes a riband or a rose;

For he will see them on to-night;

   And with the thought her colour burns;

   And, having left the glass, she turns

Once more to set a ringlet right;

And, even when she turn'd, the curse

   Had fallen, and her future Lord

   Was drown'd in passing thro' the ford,

Or kill'd in falling from his horse.

O what to her shall be the end?

   And what to me remains of good?

   To her, perpetual maidenhood,

And unto me no second friend.

Other people try to lighten his grief by telling him that he still has other friends, or that loss is a common thing but in doing so they belittle his feeling for a dear loss. Understandably, Tennyson seems to take exception with people saying this is common. He thinks that common isn't good. And he uses a [metaphor](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/metaphor.html) to illustrate his point. This advice is to him like chaff, the worthless pieces of hull that are left over when wheat is processed into grain. Just because people die and this is a common occurrence doesn't make his loss any easier to bear. Fathers lose their sons when their lives have only half been lived. Tennyson is addressing these peeps as if they were sitting right next to him. He uses apostrophe to address mothers in general, through this specific mother that he is speaking, who have lost their sons, for example at sea.

Then the speaker moves on to lovers who have lost their beloveds. He uses the sad example of a girl braiding her hair and waiting for her beloved to come back. The speaker imagines her anxiously awaiting his return, only to find out that he's drowned, or has fallen off of a horse. Poet takes a pessimistic tone to tell us that there are many ways people can die, humans are mortal and can easily die. We can’t help but pity the girl because her beloved is gone, she'll forever remain in the state of "maidenhood". And the poet has lost a "second friend" (Arthur was supposed to marry one of Tennyson's sister). This canto is more personal than just describing the universal human condition of everyone eventually having to deal with grief.

**Canto VII**

Dark house, by which once more I stand

   Here in the long unlovely street,

   Doors, where my heart was used to beat

So quickly, waiting for a hand,

A hand that can be clasp'd no more—

   Behold me, for I cannot sleep,

   And like a guilty thing I creep

At earliest morning to the door.

He is not here; but far away

   The noise of life begins again,

   And ghastly thro' the drizzling rain

On the bald street breaks the blank day.

Tennyson seems to be hanging around the place where his friend lived, which he characterizes as a "dark house". He once used to wait at that house for a hand that clasped his, but now he can't sleep and is creeping around the house in the early hours of the morning even when he knows his friend is not there anymore. Even though the neighbourhood wakes up around him, the speaker sees the breaking day as "ghastly" and "blank." It is "drizzling rain," as a blank day is starting and somewhere far off life begins.

**Canto VIII**

A happy lover who has come

   To look on her that loves him well,

   Who 'lights and rings the gateway bell,

And learns her gone and far from home;

He saddens, all the magic light

   Dies off at once from bower and hall,

   And all the place is dark, and all

The chambers emptied of delight:

So find I every pleasant spot

   In which we two were wont to meet,

   The field, the chamber, and the street,

For all is dark where thou art not.

Yet as that other, wandering there

   In those deserted walks, may find

   A flower beat with rain and wind,

Which once she foster'd up with care;

So seems it in my deep regret,

   O my forsaken heart, with thee

   And this poor flower of poesy

Which little cared for fades not yet.

But since it pleased a vanish'd eye,

   I go to plant it on his tomb,

   That if it can it there may bloom,

Or, dying, there at least may die.

Now Tennyson uses an extended [metaphor](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/metaphor.html). When a man comes to visit a woman he loves and discovers that she is not there, he grows sad and all the light is sucked out of the place, since his hopes are dashed. Tennyson feels like the lover who has been abandoned when his friend is gone. All of the places they once used to meet are now dark because he is not there. This canto is heavy with the darkness vs. light [imagery](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/imagery.html) . He returns to his previous metaphor of the man and woman in love. Tennyson's poem is like a flower that the beloved woman once nurtured, but that has now been beaten down with wind and rain. Just as a grieving man might put a flower on the tomb of his beloved, Tennyson is going to "plant" his poem on his friend's tomb. If it doesn't bloom (like the metaphorical flower), it will at least be close to him. The act of placing the poem on his friend's tomb is just another metaphor.

**Canto IX**

Fair ship, that from the Italian shore

   Sailest the placid ocean-plains

   With my lost Arthur's loved remains,

Spread thy full wings, and waft him o'er.

So draw him home to those that mourn

   In vain; a favourable speed

   Ruffle thy mirror'd mast, and lead

Thro' prosperous floods his holy urn.

All night no ruder air perplex

   Thy sliding keel, till Phosphor, bright

   As our pure love, thro' early light

Shall glimmer on the dewy decks.

Sphere all your lights around, above;

   Sleep, gentle heavens, before the prow;

   Sleep, gentle winds, as he sleeps now,

My friend, the brother of my love;

My Arthur, whom I shall not see

   Till all my widow'd race be run;

   Dear as the mother to the son,

More than my brothers are to me.

Tennyson tells about a ship that brought his friend's body back to England from Italy. Poet mentions the identity of the person he is mourning, Arthur. He urges the ship to quickly and safely bring Arthur's remains home. In these lines he use lots of [enjambment](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/enjambment.html)—it points to his difficulty in talking about his loss. Tennyson wishes that no winds will disturb the boat, and that the heavens and winds will sleep as it's making its way over. Phrases like "heavens" and "winds" tells about harsh weather. He wants these to sleep as his friend is now sleeping. Tennyson is speaking as if the ship is coming with Arthur's body right now, but it was many years since he had died. He describes that Arthur was the brother of Tennyson's love. The last stanza in this canto is heavy with grief. He describes his life as "widow'd" without Arthur and claims his friend is as dear to him as a mother to a son or as close as brothers. Many [metaphors](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/metaphor.html) are used for their relationship.

**Canto X**

I hear the noise about thy keel;

   I hear the bell struck in the night:

   I see the cabin-window bright;

I see the sailor at the wheel.

Thou bring'st the sailor to his wife,

   And travell'd men from foreign lands;

   And letters unto trembling hands;

And, thy dark freight, a vanish'd life.

So bring him; we have idle dreams:

   This look of quiet flatters thus

   Our home-bred fancies. O to us,

The fools of habit, sweeter seems

To rest beneath the clover sod,

   That takes the sunshine and the rains,

   Or where the kneeling hamlet drains

The chalice of the grapes of God;

Than if with thee the roaring wells

   Should gulf him fathom-deep in brine;

   And hands so often clasp'd in mine,

Should toss with tangle and with shells.

Tennyson imagines he is there to see the ship carrying his friend home. Use of [anaphora](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/anaphora.html) in Lines 221-222 and lines 223-224; both starts with "I see." This repetition emphasizes Tennyson's feeling of being there on the boat. He's still talking directly to the ship about how it's bringing something bad his friend's dead body, described as "dark freight", in contrast to the positive things it usually brings: sailors to their families, men from afar, and letters to home. The next stanza, when the speaker urges the boat to bring his friend, gets a bit hectic. There's more [enjambment](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/enjambment.html) and Tennyson's thoughts not only spill over from line to line but also from stanza to stanza. He would much rather see his friend safely buried than to have his body lost at sea in the "tangle," which is a pretty vivid [image](https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/imagery.html) of seaweed that the body would be wrapped up in. This image also nicely sets off the more positive image of hands clasping.

**Form**

“In Memoriam” consists of 131 smaller poems of varying length. Each short poem is comprised of isometric stanzas. The stanzas are iambic tetrameter quatrains with the rhyme scheme *ABBA,* a form that has since become known as the “In Memoriam Stanza.” (Of course, Tennyson did not invent the form—it appears in earlier works such as Shakespeare’s “The Phoenix and the Turtle”—but he did produce an enduring and memorable example of it.) With the *ABBA* rhyme scheme, the poem resolves itself in each quatrain; it cannot propel itself forward: each stanza seems complete, closed. Thus to move from one stanza to the next is a motion that does not come automatically to us by virtue of the rhyme scheme; rather, we must will it ourselves; this force of will symbolizes the poet’s difficulty in moving on after the loss of his beloved friend Arthur Henry Hallam.

## In Memoriam A.H.H. Summary

Tennyson (whether it's the real-life Tennyson or a fictionalized version is up for grabs) kicks things off with a prologue that evokes Jesus as a sort of muse. Our speaker seems hopeful that there is a reason for man's existence and a bigger plan for everyone. Humans are puny in comparison to God, and that's why people grieve so much. They just can't see the larger plan and can't get enough distance to put things like the loss of human life within a greater context.

The speaker gets right to some heavy-duty mourning over a close friend's death (who we later find out is named Arthur). He re-creates in his mind how his friend's body came back to England from Italy. Tennyson moves through various stages of grief, from "calm despair" to "wild and wandering cries." Even though he sometimes regards his feelings as sins, he defends them as normal.

Next, Tennyson meditates upon the comfort he can gain from the Bible and upon how various resurrections worked there. And no—he's not talking about literally raising Arthur from the dead. Instead, it's all about considering the idea of being immortal in a Christian sense (where the good guys get to go to Heaven). He he tries to take some comfort in that, but it's hard out here for a mourner.

So, he moves on to thinking about how nature fits in with The Big Picture. Tennyson starts to struggle with finding meaning in a world that seems random and governed by uncomfortably new ideas such as the Theory of Evolution (that reference to "Nature red in tooth and claw" is one big hint that this is very much on Tennyson's radar). He also struggles with the idea that God is good when he has seemingly created a world filled with human suffering.

Tennyson finally takes comfort in the idea that humans, at least, are good—like his friend Arthur, who was intelligent and really cared about people. He considers some answers to problems he previously set up and, in what we might regard as the climax of the entire poem, imagines reuniting with Arthur. He starts to feel better and lets go of some of his doubt.

Toward the end, he starts to realize that it's all about gaining knowledge, and that knowledge is one of the higher purposes of humans. He also recognizes that human beings have souls, which allows for a sort of immortality. He ends with an epilogue that celebrates the wedding of his sister. So, Tennyson has lost a dear friend, but ends up gaining a brother-in-law whom he is hopeful might be a sort of stand-in for Arthur.

#### Analysis

“In Memoriam” is often considered Tennyson’s greatest poetic achievement. It is a stunning and profoundly moving long poem consisting of a prologue, 131 cantos/stanzas, and an epilogue. It was published in 1850, but Tennyson began writing the individual poems in 1833 after learning that his closest friend, the young Cambridge poet Arthur Henry Hallam, had suddenly died at age 22 of a cerebral hemorrhage. Over the course of seventeen years Tennyson worked on and revised the poems, but he did not initially intend to publish them as one long work.

When he prepared “In Memoriam” (initially planning on calling it “The Way of the Soul”) for publication, Tennyson placed the poems in an order to suit the major thematic progressions of the work; thus, the poems as published are not in the order in which they were written. Even with the reordering of the poems, there is no single unified theme. Grief, loss and renewal of faith, survival, and other themes compete with one another.

The work is notoriously difficult, and it is unclear how much other poets have appreciated it. T.S. Eliot stated that it is “the most unapproachable of all [Tennyson’s] poems.” Charlotte Bronte commented that she closed it halfway through, and that “it is beautiful; it is mournful; it is monotonous.” The poem has also brought tremendous comfort to those who seek within its lines a way to assuage and eventually come out of their grief. Queen Victoria famously told Tennyson that it was much comfort to her after her husband, Prince Albert, passed away.

The poem partly belongs to the genre of elegy, which is a poem occasioned by the death of a person. The standard elegy includes ceremonial mourning for the deceased, extolling his virtues, and seeking consolation for his death. Other famous elegies, to which In Memoriam is often compared, include John Milton’s Lycidas, Shelley’s Adonais, and Wordsworth’s “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.” The epilogue is also an epithalamion, or a classical wedding celebration poem. The stanzas of the poems have uneven lengths but have a very regular poetic meter. The style, which Tennyson used to such great effect that it is now called the “In Memoriam stanza,” consists of tetrameter quatrains rhymed abba. The lines are short, and the rhythm is strict, which imparts a sense of stasis as well as labor to move from one line to the next.

In terms of structure, Tennyson once remarked that the poem was organized around the three celebrations of Christmas that occur. Other scholars point to different forms of structure. According to scholars A.C. Bradley and E.D.H. Johnson, cantos 1-27 are poems of despair/ungoverned sense/subjective; cantos 28-77 are poems of mind governing sense/despair/objective; cantos 78-102 are poems of spirit governing mind/doubt/subjective; and cantos 103-31 are spirit harmonizing sense and spirit/objective. In terms of the structure of Tennyson’s thoughts on the meaning of poetry, the scholars find a four-part division: poetry as release from emotion, poetry as release from thought, poetry as self-realization, and poetry as mission/prophecy. Canto 95 is seen, from this view, as the climax of the poem.

The most conspicuous theme in the poem is, of course, grief. The poet’s emotional progression from utter despair to hopefulness fits into the structure observed by the scholars. The early poems are incredibly personal and bleak. Tennyson feels abandoned and lost. He cannot sleep and personifies the cruelty of Sorrow, “Priestess in the vaults of Death.” He wonders if poetry is capable of expressing his loss. He wanders by his friend’s old house, sick with sadness. Memory is oppressive. Nature herself seems hostile, chaotic. His grief has a concomitant in a lack of religious faith.

However, as the poems proceed, the poet begins to grapple with his grief and find ways to move beyond it. He learns, as scholar Joseph Becker writes, to “experience deeper layers of grief so that he may transcend the limitations of time and space that Hallam’s death represents.” He has learned to love better and embrace his sorrow, which he now personifies as a wife, not a mistress. He learns that Hallam, while once his flesh-and-blood friend whom he misses dearly, is now a transcendent spiritual being, something the human race can aspire to become. Although Tennyson will never fully recover from the loss of Hallam, he can move forward; the wedding of his other sister establishes this result for him.

One of the reasons why the poem is so lauded by critics is its engagement with some contemporary Victorian religious and scientific debates and discourses. Tennyson is dealing not only with his sorrow over Hallam’s death, but also with the lack of religious faith that came with it. He wonders what the point of life is if man’s individual soul is not immortal after death. His emotions vacillate between doubt and faith. He eventually comes to terms with the fact that Hallam may be gone in bodily form, but that he is a perfect spiritual being whose consciousness endures past his death. Becker writes that Tennyson experiences “renewed faith ... that both individual and human survival are predicated on spiritual rather than physical terms.”

Also, significantly, he ruminates over the new scientific findings of the age, which are forerunners of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. In particular, Charles Lyell’s Principles of Geology (1846) undermined the biblical story of creation. Several of the cantos deal with the ideas of the randomness and brutality of Nature towards man. Canto LVI has the poet anguishing, “So careful of the type? But no. / From scarped cliff and quarried stone / She cries, ‘A thousand types are gone: / I care for nothing, all shall go.’” One of the most famous lines in the English language, “Nature, red in tooth and claw,” is also in this canto.

Tennyson grapples with what all of this means in terms of his religious faith as well as in the context of his loss; death is very, very long. The critic William Flesch observes, “Tennyson feels the utter oppressiveness of the emptiness and vacuity of time that Lyell has so devastatingly demonstrated. Within that, he feels the pain of his mourning for Hallam, a pain that may be sometimes intermittent but is always at the core of his being.” Ultimately, though, the fact that love prevails and persists in the vastness of Nature gives Tennyson the hope he needs to place his faith in transcendence and salvation once more. The poet never rejected the actual findings of Lyell and others, but he certainly saw them as only partial answers to the mysteries of the universe and believed God still cared very much for human beings and that there was hope for such humans to attain a higher state.

### Themes

## Grief

Grief permeates Tennyson’s poetry and was a major feature of Tennyson’s emotional life. He endured the deaths of his parents, the ensuing mental illness and addictions of many of his family members and, as a kind of muse, the death of his close friend Arthur Henry Hallam. His poems are frank discussions of despair and the trouble of using words sufficient to express it, and he demonstrates the significance of writing poetry in the face of sorrow and loss. In some of the poems his grief is overwhelming, and he does not know if he wants to continue living. In others he finds ways to manage his grief, coming to accept that sorrow may always be a part of one’s life, while acknowledging other things in life inspire happiness and hope.

## Spirituality

Tennyson adhered to a Christian faith that can most vividly be seen in “In Memoriam,” but he was not wary of expressing his difficulties with that faith and religious belief, particularly in the wake of the death of Hallam. He engages with the scientific findings of the Victorian era, wondering whether Nature is truly indifferent to Man and whether death only brings obliteration of the soul. He finds it difficult to be optimistic and positive that he will be reunited with Hallam after death and that there is any purpose in living. The poet’s lapses in faith, however, are reconciled by the end of the poem. He moves from doubt to acceptance, certain once more that the spirit is not gone after death but lives on and progresses to a higher state. He believes that God does have a plan for human beings and that one’s presence on earth is not accidental or unheeded.

#### The Reconciliation of Religion and Science

The poem is also a deeply philosophical reflection on religion, science, and the promise of immortality. Tennyson was deeply troubled by the proliferation of scientific knowledge about the origins of life and human progress: while he was writing this poem, Sir Charles Lyell published his *Principles of Geology,* which undermined the biblical creation story, and Robert Chambers published his early evolutionary tract, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation.* In “In Memoriam,” Tennyson insisted that we hold fast to our faith in a higher power in spite of our inability to prove God’s existence: “Believing where we cannot prove.” He reflects early evolutionary theories in his faith that man, through a process lasting millions of years, is developing into something greater. In the end, Tennyson replaces the doctrine of the immortality of the soul with the immortality of mankind through evolution, thereby achieving a synthesis between his profound religious faith and the new scientific ideas of his day. *In Memoriam* connects the despair Tennyson felt over the loss of his friend Arthur Hallam and the despair he felt when contemplating a godless world. In the end, the poem affirms both religious faith and faith in human progress. Nevertheless, Tennyson continued to struggle with the reconciliation of science and religion, as illustrated by some of his later work.

#### The Virtues of Perseverance and Optimism

After the death of his friend Arthur Hallam, Tennyson struggled through a period of deep despair, which he eventually overcame to begin writing again. During his time of mourning, Tennyson rarely wrote and, for many years, battled alcoholism. Many of his poems are about the temptation to give up and fall prey to pessimism, but they also extol the virtues of optimism and discuss the importance of struggling on with life. The need to persevere and continue is the central theme of *In Memoriam* and “Ulysses”, both written after Hallam’s death. Perhaps because of Tennyson’s gloomy and tragic childhood, perseverance and optimism also appear in poetry written before Hallam’s death, such as “The Lotos-Eaters”.

### Motifs

#### Tragic Death

Early, tragic death and suicide appear throughout Tennyson’s poetry. Perhaps the most significant event of his life was the untimely death of his best friend Arthur Hallam at age twenty-two, which prompted Tennyson to write his greatest literary work, *In Memoriam*. This long poem uses the so-called *In Memoriam* stanza, or a **Quatrain** that uses **Iambic Tetrameter** and has an *abba* rhyme scheme. The formal consistency expresses Tennyson’s grief and links the disparate stanzas together into an elegiac whole.

### Symbols

#### King Arthur

To Tennyson, King Arthur symbolizes the ideal man, and Arthurian England was England in its best and purest form. But King Arthur also had a more personal representation to Tennyson: the mythic king represents a version of his friend Arthur Henry Hallam, whose death at twenty-two profoundly affected Tennyson. Hallam’s death destroyed his potential and promise, which allowed Tennyson to idealize Hallam. This idealization allows Tennyson to imagine what might have been in the best possible light, much as he does when describing King Arthur and his court.