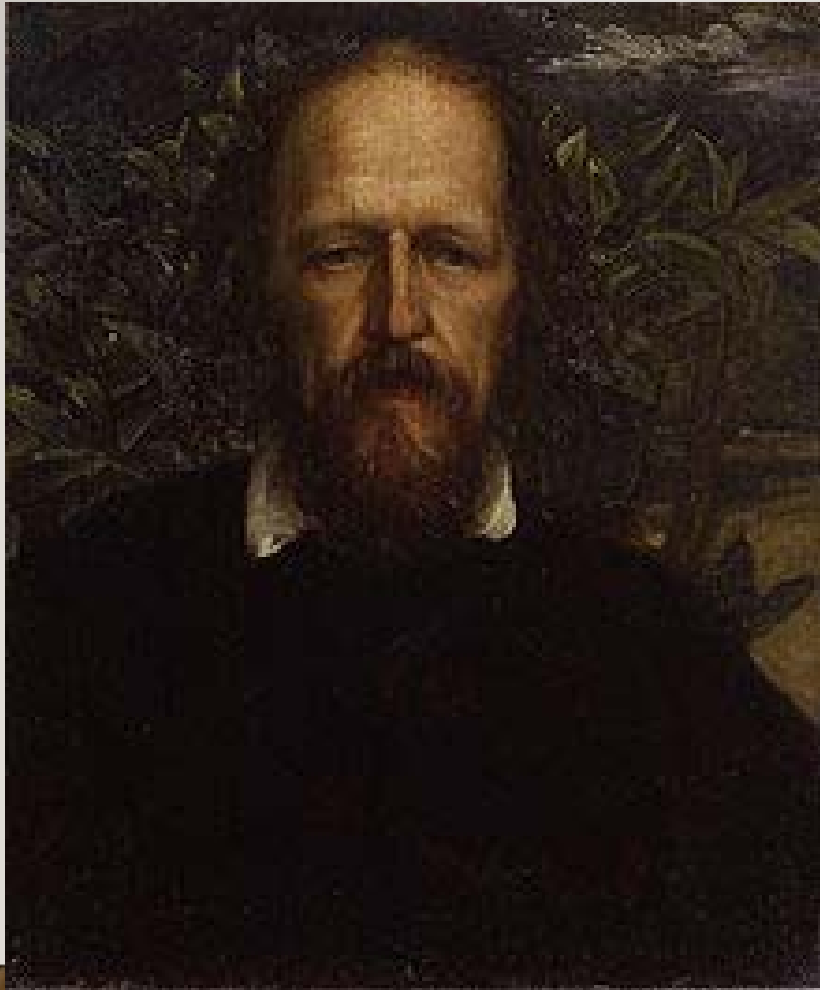


IN MEMORIAM

BY ALFRED LORD TENNYSON



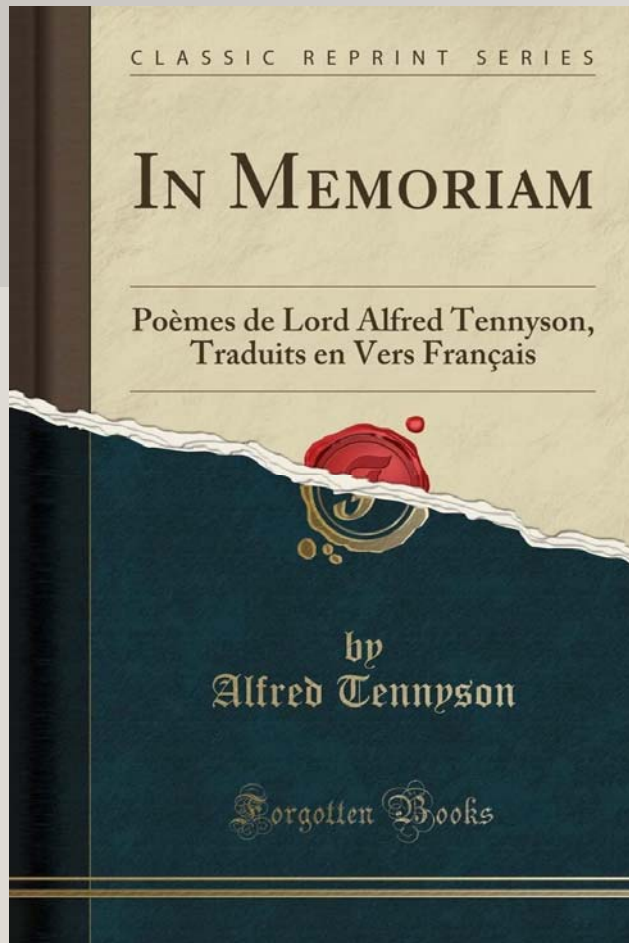
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Alfred Tennyson, 1st Baron Tennyson

(6 August 1809 – 6 October 1892)

He was a British poet. He was the Poet Laureate of Great Britain and Ireland during much of Queen Victoria's reign and remains one of the most popular British poets.



“In Memoriam” by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, also known as “In Memoriam A.H.H” is a poem written for Tennyson’s friend, Arthur Henry Hallam, following his unexpected death in 1833. The poem has 133 cantos, and each stanza contains four lines. The rhyme scheme is ABBA, in iambic tetrameter, a form known as “Memoriam Stanzas” due to its melancholy effect. Tennyson first published the poem anonymously in 1850.

SUMMARY

- The poem opens addressing Jesus, discussing how God made both life and death. He uses the image of Jesus with his foot on a skull to show him as the conqueror of Death. Humanity is humbled in the presence of God, as our “systems” are finite. We are unable to see God’s plan.
- Tennyson asks for God’s forgiveness for the nature of his words, as he fluctuates between faith and doubt throughout the poem. He says he has “wild and wandering words” as he tries to make sense of the death of his friend. He prays for wisdom and regrets his wasted youth.
- Following this prologue, Tennyson describes how he grieved. He once believed that men would slowly rise from death into an eternal state; he once believed in God, but in his grief, he has begun to doubt. Tennyson wishes he could fast forward through time to skip the grieving period. He suggests, “Love clasp Grief lest both be drown’d,” meaning he would rather combine his love for his friend with his grieving and relish the experience than be “overworn” by the concept of death.

SUMMARY

- Tennyson addresses a yew tree in a graveyard. He imagines that the roots are wrapped around a body buried beneath. The seasons, and nature, move on in their patterns beating out the “little lives of men.” He then addresses Sorrow, who attempts to convince Tennyson that nature moves on and is purposeless and meaningless. Here he questions the existence of God and an afterlife.
- While he sometimes believes he is sinning by writing of his grief, Tennyson thinks, “The sad mechanic exercise” works “like dull narcotics numbing the pain.” He argues that even though the loss of a loved one is common to the human race, it doesn’t make him less bitter, but more so knowing that every day someone else’s heart is breaking. He imagines families who are still waiting for their dead family members, like a mother who waits for her son who has drowned at sea. He also uses a house as a metaphor, describing how he goes to a house where he and Arthur used to meet, only to find it dark.

SUMMARY

- Arthur's body was returned to England from Italy by ship, and Tennyson experienced "calm," the word that begins every stanza in Canto 11. He spends a lot of time addressing and describing the ship that brought his friend's body.
- By winter, Tennyson's woe is causing "wild unrest" in him. He confronts this change in Canto 16, wondering that sorrow could cause him to feel both wild and calm. Only the Bible comforts him as he considers that his friend has gained everlasting life as a Christian. He struggles, however, with the idea that a good God would allow humanity to suffer.
- As he questions the meaning of death and life, he concludes that humans have souls allowing them to live on after death and that their purpose on earth is to gain knowledge. As Arthur was a good and intelligent man (whom he often compares to Jesus), he believes that Arthur's soul must be alive somewhere. He imagines meeting with him again.

SUMMARY

- The epilogue finds Tennyson at his sister's wedding. While he has lost a close friend, he has gained a brother-in-law.
- One of the more well-known lines in the poem is in Canto 56 where Tennyson refers to "Nature, red in tooth and claw." This line points to ideas of evolution that first appeared in *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* in 1844. The struggle between literal Biblical interpretations and new scientific findings is evident in "In Memoriam," but Tennyson seems to decide that the two ideas will eventually merge.
- Another phrase often quoted is "'Tis better to have loved and lost/Than never to have loved at all," which appears in Canto 27.

SUMMARY

- Arthur Hallam and Tennyson became friends in 1829 at Cambridge. Hallam met Tennyson's sister, Emily, and the two were soon engaged. Hallam also wrote poetry, and he and Tennyson planned to one day publish a collection together. Hallam was a significant force in getting Tennyson's work published. He died of a brain hemorrhage while visiting Vienna with his father at age twenty-two. Emily would later marry and name her first son after Hallam.
- Queen Victoria met with Tennyson in 1883 to tell him the poem had been a comfort to her following the death of her husband, Prince Albert.