

*In Memoriam: The Hope of the Victorian Age*

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**Abstract**

The nineteenth century England was a time of scientific discoveries and the beginning of democracy. It was an age where scientific advancement came into conflict with the religious theories and this issue has been reflected in the poem *In Memoriam*. With the death of Arthur Hallam it reinforced Tennyson's religious doubt which was already shaken by science. Later he could assure himself that science and religion walked hand in hand. He underwent a spiritual transformation that strengthens his faith in God and he believed that life will come to some ultimate good no matter how filled with sin and doubt. He could assure himself that death is not the end but the beginning of the immortal life of the soul. *In Memoriam* became a hope for the doubt-filled people of the Victorian Age where they could cling on to their faith and accept even the new scientific discoveries.

**Key Words:** Alfred Tennyson, In Memoriam, Victorian, Scientific discoveries, Doubt, Faith, Hope.

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## **Alfred Tennyson**

Born on August 6, 1809, Alfred Tennyson was the fourth son of Dr. George Tennyson. He won the Chancellor's medal for his English poem 'Timbuctoo' at Cambridge in 1829. The poem *In Memoriam* was published in 1850 and he was made the Poet Laureate in the same year until his death in 1892. He was even raised to a peerage in 1883 and died on September 23, 1892. He wrote the poem *In Memoriam* after the death of his Cambridge friend Hallam, who was also engaged to his sister Emily, at Vienna in 1833. The elegy became a satisfactory answer to the problems of existence, especially those raised by the struggle between religion and science. The Victorians embraced the elegy as a complement to the consolation offered by the Bible.

## **Representing Christian Faith**

*In Memoriam* represents the Christian faith of the nineteenth century which Alfred Tennyson experienced after the death of his friend, Arthur Henry Hallam. Stopford A. Brooke suggests that "It is a song of victory and life arising out of defeat and death; of peace which has forgotten doubt; of joy whose mother was sorrow but who has turned his mother's heart into delight. The conquest of love...the moral triumph of the soul over the worst blows of fate, over the outward forces of Nature, even over its own ill – that is the motive of the poems which endure, which, like the great lighthouses, stand and shine through the storms of time to save and lead into a heaven of peace the navies of humanity" (Brook, 1895, p.185).

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the religious faith of the people were firm and strong when they had a complete faith in the Bible. Even science and religion walked hand in hand and were considered as the two faces of a coin. The Christian sense of sin and belief in judgement, the Christian assumption of personal morality, man's immortality, with its accompanying appreciation of the world as a moral order, a true cosmos, and life, were still terribly real in early Victorian England (Burow, 1979).

## **The Prologue**

In the Prologue Tennyson expounds upon the religious faith of the Age where they lived by absolute faith in God even if they cannot see nor prove his existence and their faith was not by sight. For Tennyson, the ultimate futility of the world follows primarily from the futility of science to comprehend spiritual reality. He knows that human intellect has a

limitation of its own. Here, he advocated the people of the age to trust in the Lord who is greater than the systems that seek to control and bring order to society (Hahn, 2007). He writes:

Our little systems have their day;  
They have their day and cease to be:  
They are but broken lights of thee,  
And thou, O Lord, art more than they. (Prologue 17-20)

### **Science, Religion and Democracy**

The nineteenth century was the age of rapid scientific development which kept pace with the progress of democracy. The rapid progress and acquisition of knowledge caused an upheaval in thought; new theories came into conflict with old faiths; the ancient intellectual order was shaken at its foundation. It was marked by the spirit of inquiry and criticism, by skepticism and religious uncertainty and by spiritual struggle; it was an age of faith and doubt. The conflict between science and religion became intense and wide spread. Tennyson refused to neither abandon his faith in God, nor reject the science, but tried to maintain a balance between the two by acknowledging the scientific discoveries and at the same time maintain his religious faith. The spreading scientific spirit, searching investigations, and skeptical groupings, dug up the foundations of Christianity and questioned the authenticity of the Bible.

Alan Sinfield observes, “In Tennyson’s time religious debate became general, with the spread of education, the growth of scientific knowledge and publishing, and the inability of the Anglican church to cope with the rate of social and demographic change. Engagement with matters of ‘faith and doubt’ seemed a responsible move for a poet” (Sinfield, 1986). The religious issues which shook the mid-Victorian Age are reflected through the sensibility of Alfred Tennyson in *In Memoriam*. The Anglican Church was no more the bedrock establishment who had the sole authority on religious issues within English society during the Victorian Age. They were being challenged by other denominations and sects with different viewpoints and the church as a whole was unable to unite and address the cultural, technological and scientific shifts taking place within society (Settle, 2007). K.W. Gransden points out the conflict that took place between religion and science on the origin of mankind: “The bitterest intellectual battles of Mid-Victorian England were fought not over political

issues but over religious ones. It seemed to some that the biological and geological discoveries of the evolutionists shed a new and doubtful light on man's origin, his role in the universe and his future (Gransden, 1964).

### **Facing the Hostile World**

In addition to Tennyson's faith being already shaken by science, Hallam's death reinforced his doubts and made the world more hostile. He is preoccupied chiefly by his grief at the death of his friend Hallam in the first 27 sections; and in Sections 31-49, he philosophizes about immortality. In section 34 and those following, one arrives at a clear statement of the central dilemma forced upon Alfred Tennyson by the fact of Hallam's death. If there is no eternal life after death, then his life is devoid of any ultimate purpose or significance and he would wish only to die.

### **Seeking Ideals in Human Life**

Tennyson seeks ideals in human life that will substantiate its reality. He tries to reason whether death is really death. If someone he trusted could affirm that there was nothing beyond death, he would then strive to keep his ideal of love alive for even a short time. Without immortality, love would be just a mere sensuality. In section 35, he insists, for he hopes that love is "immortal"

...if Death were seen

At first as Death, Love had not been

Or been in narrowest working shut. (Section 35, Lines 18-20)

### **Immortality Is Reasonable**

In section 40 through 47, Tennyson appears to be reaching a point where immortality seems reasonable. He says that Hallam is living a new kind of life in heaven which will yield immortal fruit. He believes that Hallam is moving somewhere in an unknown place like he is moving here on this earth. He is confident that he will meet Hallam again on the Judgement day when every soul will rise again and stand before God for the Judgement, and those chosen will live an eternal life of harmony and peace in heaven. The basis of his faith arises out of the purpose of life which is to establish an individual consciousness or identity. Surely, then, the dead must retain some memory of their earthly life; otherwise man would have turned himself anew after death, thus rendering the purpose of living a mere waste of blood

and breath. He believed that personalities must differ for some specific reason. He thought that we must develop these varied personalities only to carry them with us into death:

So round he to a separate mind  
From whence clear memory may begin  
As thro the frame that binds him in  
His isolation grows defined.

This use may lie in blood and breath,  
Which else were fruitless of their due,  
Had man to learn himself anew  
Beyond the second birth of death. (Section 45, Lines 9-16)

### **Ultimate Good in Every Life**

Alfred Tennyson believed that each life, no matter how filled with sin and doubt, must come to some ultimate good. He believed that in some unknown way good will come out of evil and not even a single life will perish in vain or thrown away as something utterly useless and unwanted. He believed that God has made everything with a divine purpose and so not even a single life will vanish without fulfilling its purpose. God has made the universe according to his plan and has kept everything exactly in its place. He believed that life at the end will ultimately yield place to love, hope, peace and spiritual joy. In section 54 we find that:

Oh yet we trust that somehow good  
Will be the final goal of all,  
To pangs of nature, sins of will,  
Defects of doubt, and taints of blood;

That nothing walks with aimless feet;  
That not one life shall be destroy'd,  
Or cast as rubbish to the void,  
When God hath made the pile complete,  
.....  
Behold, we know not anything;  
I can but trust that good shall fall

At last-far-off-at last, to all,  
And every winter change to spring. (Section 54, Lines 1-16)

### **Questioning Immortality**

Although he grew up with pious parents the evidence of Nature makes Alfred Tennyson doubt the existence of immortality and contradict the concept that love is the ultimate law of creation. He believed that not one life shall be destroyed without the hope and expectation of eternal life springing from God. But he questioned himself why Nature which seems so careful of each species should seem so careless of the individual:

So careful of the type she seems,  
So careless of the single life;  
.....  
And faintly trust the larger hope. (Section 55, Lines 7-20)

### **Tennyson and Darwin**

Charles Darwin had published his *The Origin of Species* in the year 1859 but long before its publication, Alfred Tennyson had suggested the principles of natural selection. According to his son, Hallam Tennyson, he ‘was occasionally much troubled with the intellectual problem of the apparent profusion and waste of life and by the vast amount of sin and suffering throughout the world, for these seemed to militate against the idea of the omnipotent and All-loving Father (Memoir I). Hallam Tennyson further says that his father meant by “the larger hope, that the whole human race would, through perhaps ages of suffering, be at length purified and saved (Ibid). In section 55, Alfred Tennyson comments that nature seems to care only for the continuation of species - the biological “types” – as opposed to the preservation of the individual life. He believed that ‘no life may fail beyond the grave’ for God unlike Nature, considers each life so precious that it survives forever in the afterlife. God and nature, given the opposite perceptions of each regarding individual life’s worth are effectively ‘at strife’ with one another. Alfred Tennyson still doubts God’s supremacy and His assurance of life after death which remains of particular importance; he yearns for an eventual reunion with his departed friend, Arthur Hallam.

### **From Doubts Back to Faith**

As we reach section 82, there is a gradual change in the poet's philosophy of life from doubts back to his faith in the immortality of the spirit. His lack of faith disappears and he has come to the realization that the spirit does survive – that immortality is a fact. He says that Hallam will be fruitful and useful at the place where he is now. He says, "I know":

I wage not any feud with Death

.....

Will bloom to profit, elsewhere. (Section 82, Lines 1-12)

Alfred Tennyson said that he has now been roused to activity although grief at first benumbed him. He suggests that it is better to have the experience of love even if the love was a frustrated one, than never to have experienced love:

'Tis better to have loved and lost,

Than never to have loved at all. (Section 85, Lines 3-4)

In section 106 there is a complete transition from doubt to faith in which Alfred Tennyson calls upon the bells to ring out the old epoch of enervating grief, strife, disease and sin and to ring in the new era of truth, benevolence, peace and Christ-like humanity. He had the faith and hope which is mentioned in the bible, Revelation chapter 20 that the devil and Satan will be bound and cast into a bottomless pit, and shut up for a thousand years, and at the same time those souls who have not worshipped the beast, neither his image, nor had received his mark upon their foreheads or in their hands will live and reign with Christ for a thousand years. (Revelation 20) Alfred Tennyson's regret over Hallam's death has changed to a mood of cheer which is like a spring of violets with buds and blossoms like other flowers; like the birds which had migrated to other regions and have returned happily to build their nests, lay eggs and hatch them. Alfred Tennyson looks forward to his reunion with his friend in the next life instead of looking back mournfully to their early friendship.

### **In the Midst of Problematic Faith of Victorian Age**

In section 118, Alfred Tennyson attempts to present some reassuring words on the relation of the development of a man's beliefs and hopes, in spite of probably the most disturbing religious problems of the 1840's, of the Victorian Age. Although Alfred Tennyson grieves for Hallam's death and disconnects from the community, thinking about how he could possibly live a better life, become a better person. He says that death is not the end but we must work hard for the beauty of our inner self, thoughts and consciousness in order to



rise above Darwin's theory of natural selection. Alfred Tennyson says that his parting with Hallam is not forever, for he is sure to meet him again in Heaven. His love for Hallam and the hope that they will someday meet again in Heaven is the bond which holds Alfred Tennyson to his faith. In Section 120 Tennyson has the faith that death is not the end of life, but believes strongly in the immortality of the soul. He accepts that the end of earthly life is just the beginning of an eternal life.

Let science prove we are, and then  
What matters Science unto men,  
At least to me? I would not stay.  
Let him, the wiser man who springs  
Hereafter, up from childhood shape  
His action like the greater ape,  
But I was born to other things. (Section 120, Lines 6-12)

### **Not Just Moulds of Clay**

Here Alfred Tennyson clearly states that human beings are not just moulds of clay and not merely a product of skill. Life is of no use to Tennyson if science is able to prove that humans are strictly mind and body that perish at death. Tennyson does not subscribe to this theory because he has faith and confidence that his life consists of much more than the short time he has been allotted on earth. He was 'born to other things' to look ahead to a life that transcends the mental and physical realms (op. cit. Settle).

### **Connect between Prologue and Epilogue**

The last verse of the Epilogue brings *In Memoriam* to a close with a reflection of the thought of the Prologue. "... the soul after grappling with anguish and darkness, doubt and death, emerges with the inspiration of strong and steadfast faith in the Love of God for man, and in the oneness of man with God, and of man with man in Him."

That God, which ever lives and loves,  
One God, one law, one element,  
And one far-off divine event,  
To which the whole creation moves. (Epilogue)

### **Ever Lasting Life**



The people of the nineteenth century now reaffirm their belief in the biblical idea of the kingdom of God. They now have the faith that their lives do not end with death but whosoever believes in Christ the Lord shall not perish but will have everlasting life and those who do not believe will be thrown into hell forever. Tennyson now believes that he will meet his friend Hallam once again where he is with God at present. He could assure himself and his age that science walks hand in hand with religion after all, bearing witness to a God of eternal process and to the glorious destiny. He proposes for humanity that the findings of anthropology, instead of mocking men's aspirations and sufferings, showed them to be indispensable conditions for the progress of mankind (Rose, 1973, p.137). According to Philip Davis, "... the chastening achievement of *In Memoriam* is not that it discovers something newer or better than the Judeo-Christian faith – but that it renews trust in that faith by finding it again – irreducibly primal and pristine, within a strangely different perspective" (op. cit. Settle). The 'strangely different perspective' Davis is referring to is the inherent and intuitive link Tennyson discovers he has with God on an emotional and spiritual level within the heart.

### **Overcoming Doubt**

Tennyson experienced a period of doubt but ultimately attained a position of belief, he did not ignore the scientific developments but also remained a firm believer in the immortality of the soul. He underwent a spiritual transformation that strengthened his faith in God, in Christ as Lord and Saviour and the hope of a life after death, where he will meet Hallam once again. Thus, at the end he reaffirms his faith even stronger though Nature and the spreading scientific spirit had made him doubt the divine Creation and its purpose. He could now assure himself that the pain and suffering are only a test to elevate his faith. Tennyson's wavering of faith and doubt because of the scientific discoveries symbolizes the faith of the Victorian people in general. Thus, *In Memoriam* became a hope for the people of the nineteenth century where their religious faith had been shaken by the scientific discoveries and Darwin.

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