Activity 2 - *In Memoriam, A.H.H*

Resources

*In Memoriam*


- This resource will refer to a free, online copy of the text, which can be accessed at [http://www.online-literature.com/tennyson/718/](http://www.online-literature.com/tennyson/718/). It will be useful to keep this webpage open, but sections of the poem will be reproduced in full in this worksheet.

British Library

- The British Library’s web resource on Tennyson contains lots of further information you might find interesting, including articles on composition and manuscript history: see [https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/in-memoriam](https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/in-memoriam)

Tennyson’s *In Memoriam, A.H.H.* is a long poem: nearly 3000 lines in total. Reading the complete piece through for the first time will take you at least a couple of hours—it’s a good idea to do this if you have the time, but you don’t need to have read the whole poem to work through the activities in this resource.

**Background**

Tennyson composed *In Memoriam* between 1833 and 1849, to commemorate his best friend, Arthur Hallam, who died of a brain haemorrhage whilst in Vienna. Tennyson and Hallam studied together at Trinity College, Cambridge, and had maintained a very close friendship: Hallam was engaged to Tennyson’s sister, and he spent time at the Tennysons’ home in Lincolnshire in the university summer vacations.

Tennyson was deeply and desperately upset by Hallam’s sudden death, and spent the next seventeen years composing a series of fragmentary poems, which were collected and
published as *In Memoriam* in 1850. The poem is 133 cantos long, and each canto has between three and thirty-six stanzas of four lines each. Broadly, *In Memoriam* is about the different stages of grief and mourning that Tennyson experienced, and it is also a monument in verse to Hallam—a bit like a language version of Queen Victoria’s Albert Memorial in Kensington Gardens. One of the most remarkable things about the poem is how it does not identify with any one single speaker: the voice follows of a young girl (Canto VI), an elderly couple (XCVII), and an abandoned lover (VIII). This broad approach to loss and grief gives the poem an almost universal relevance. For this reason, it has become known as one of the greatest poems in English about death and mourning.

**Task 1: Form**

Canto XIV of *In Memoriam* tells of Tennyson hearing that Hallam’s body has been returned to England. The canto is reproduced in full here:

If one should bring me this report,  
That thou hadst touch’d the land to-day,  
And I went down unto the quay,  
And found thee lying in the port;

And standing, muffled round with woe,  
Should see thy passengers in rank  
Come stepping lightly down the plank,  
And beckoning unto those they know;

And if along with these should come  
The man I held as half-divine;  
Should strike a sudden hand in mine,  
And ask a thousand things of home;

And I should tell him all my pain,  
And how my life had droop’d of late,  
And he should sorrow o’er my state  
And marvel what possess’d my brain;
And I perceived no touch of change,
No hint of death in all his frame,
But found him all in all the same,
I should not feel it to be strange.

Here, Tennyson writes about his urge to talk to Hallam about death, and how it would feel familiar if he were to walk off the boat and begin a conversation. Look at the first stanza closely:

If one should bring me this report,
That thou hadst touch’d the land to-day,
And I went down unto the quay,
And found thee lying in the port;

Here are some questions that might help you begin to explore the poem. My analysis of these lines is below; you might find that you disagree with my interpretation, which is fine—but make sure you think about why, if you do.

- What is the poem’s rhyme scheme? What effect does this rhyme scheme have?
- How does the poem’s metre work? How many beats are there in each line? Which syllables are stressed?
- Does it matter that the stanza is written as a hypothetical situation?
- What does the word ‘touch’d’ mean, in the context of the poem? What does it mean more generally?
- What does it mean to be ‘lying in the port’? What else might Tennyson be saying here?
- How does the form of the stanza relate to the meanings you think are being put across?

The first stanza of XIV begins with a projection. The speaker, Tennyson, ponders what would happen ‘If’ (emphasis mine) his friend Hallam were to return to England, alive, by boat. The second and third stanzas describe the imaginary disembarkation from the boat:
And standing, muffled round with woe,
Should see thy passengers in rank
Come stepping lightly down the plank,
And beckoning unto those they know;

And if along with these should come
The man I held as half-divine;
Should strike a sudden hand in mine,
And ask a thousand things of home;

Again, the mood is subjunctive: the situation is entirely projected, with Hallam walking ‘down the plank’ alongside the ship’s other passengers. Tennyson longs for this return—the feel of the ‘sudden hand in mine’, and of easy conversation with his friend. Paradoxically, Tennyson’s suffering is caused by the death of the young man now in front of him, and he wants to talk to the imaginary Hallam about the difficulty of dealing with his death, as is described in the fourth stanza:

And I should tell him all my pain,
And how my life had droop’d of late,
And he should sorrow o’er my state
And marvel what possess’d my brain;

The paradox arises from the fact that the spectral Hallam can assuage his friend’s pain by being there to talk about it; however, if he were alive, Tennyson would not be suffering in the first place. The presence of Hallam therefore resolves the problem, but it presents another: would it not be strange for Hallam to come to life again, after he has been mourned? Tennyson thinks not:

And I perceived no touch of change,
No hint of death in all his frame,
But found him all in all the same,
I should not feel it to be strange.
He ‘should not feel it to be strange’ for Hallam to disembark from the boat, and in his memory, Hallam exists as if he were living. There is ‘no touch of change’ and ‘No hint of death’ in his body; he is ‘all in all the same’. It might be that Tennyson is describing the unfamiliarity of death here—how accepting somebody’s absence is difficult after they die, such that the bereaved may well expect their friend or relative to appear at any moment, alive.

The form of the stanzas in canto XIV is the same as throughout the rest of the poem. Each stanza has four lines, of eight beats each. These lines are approximately iambic (meaning that the first syllable of a line is not stressed, and then the second is), which forms an iambic tetrameter. The rhyme scheme is a very clear a / b / b / a, which might have some implications for how we think about the poem. The return to the ‘a’ rhyme at the end of each stanza gives a sense of circularity, of ‘coming back’. Perhaps this emulates Tennyson’s experience of grief?

Have a think about what else the shape of the poem might signify—be adventurous, and test your ideas against different stanzas from the piece. You might think about, for example, whether words that form ‘a’ rhymes would take on a very different feel if they constituted ‘b’ rhymes. Are there any examples of this? What changes? How?

### Example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Canto XIV, stanza 5</th>
<th>Canto LXXI, stanza 3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>And I perceived no touch of <strong>change</strong>, No hint of death in all his frame, But found him all in all the same, I should not feel it to be <strong>strange</strong>.</td>
<td>While now we talk as once we talk’d Of men and minds, the dust of <strong>change</strong>, The days that grow to something <strong>strange</strong>, In walking as of old we walk’d</td>
</tr>
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- These examples are from very different places in *In Memoriam*, but show ‘change’ and ‘strange’ forming the ‘a’ and ‘b’ rhyme respectively.
- Do the stanzas feel different? How? Why?
- Do the words have a different sense? Why? Is this because of their position in the rhyme scheme, or their position in the poem?
- Do you think it is a good idea to think about poems like this? What might be helpful about this sort of analysis? What might be more problematic?
Another important thing to study in XIV is the idea of ‘touch’. In the first stanza, the line ‘That thou hadst touch’d the land to-day’ introduces a strange doubling: Hallam’s boat has ‘touched’ the land as it arrives, but the use of ‘thou’ as pronoun proffers the suggestion that it is Hallam himself who has ‘touched’ the land, an idea which is continued with the talk of Hallam walking down from the boat and speaking with Tennyson. In the third stanza, Hallam is described ‘strik[ing] a sudden hand in mine’, a mode of physical touch, and finally, in the fifth stanza, Tennyson notes that he ‘perceived no touch of change’ in Hallam’s body. These three types of touch are all very different. Think about the following questions:

- How are the varieties of ‘touch’ that are described different?
- Why might Tennyson be interested in physical touch?
- If touching something gives an indication that it is real, and if we accept that Tennyson is using this device in In Memoriam, what sort of implications does this have for poetry more generally? We can’t touch poems, but they are real!

**Task 2: Hands**

The end of Task 1 asked you to think about different forms of touch in XIV of In Memoriam. You should now have some ideas about what Tennyson is doing with touch in the poem. Here, we are going to look at another important image from the poem, which relates to touch: hands. There are lots of hands in In Memoriam—they ‘reach’ and ‘clasp’, stand in for people in their absence (synecdoche), represent God and Nature, and hold one another.

Canto VII, which talks about the immediate grief that followed Hallam’s death, is reproduced below:

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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.
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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.

Think about these questions in relation to the three stanzas here. Once you have completed these, look at hands elsewhere in the poem—do the observations you make in relation to VII apply in other places too? Or do different things happen?

- What effect do lineation and stanza breaks have in this extract?
- How does Tennyson create movement, and where do you detect changes in the poem’s pace?
- What do you think the hand represents for the speaker? How is this communicated in the poem?
- ‘Behold’ means ‘to watch or observe’, but ‘hold’ is a component of the word. Do you think this matters? Why might it be important?

Task 3: Christmas

As is mentioned in the introduction to this resource, Tennyson composed In Memoriam in fragments: he did not originally intend for it to be published as one piece, and so the poem as a whole is composed of different experiences of grieving, sourced over a seventeen year period. Here, we are going to look at how Tennyson describes four different Christmases in the poem. You’ll notice straight away that the structure remains very similar, and we will think about what is communicated in the poem’s movement.

Christmas 1 (XXIX; XXX)

XXIX

With such compelling cause to grieve
As daily vexes household peace,
And chains regret to his decease,
How dare we keep our Christmas-eve;
Which brings no more a welcome guest
To enrich the threshold of the night
With shower’d largess of delight
In dance and song and game and jest?

Yet go, and while the holly boughs
Entwine the cold baptismal font,
Make one wreath more for Use and Wont,
That guard the portals of the house;

Old sisters of a day gone by,
Gray nurses, loving nothing new;
Why should they miss their yearly due
Before their time? They too will die.

XXX
With trembling fingers did we weave
The holly round the Christmas hearth;
A rainy cloud possess’d the earth,
And sadly fell our Christmas-eve.

At our old pastimes in the hall
We gambol’d, making vain pretence
Of gladness, with an awful sense
Of one mute Shadow watching all.

We paused: the winds were in the beech:
We heard them sweep the winter land;
And in a circle hand-in-hand
Sat silent, looking each at each.

Then echo-like our voices rang;
We sung, tho’ every eye was dim,
A merry song we sang with him
Last year: impetuously we sang:

We ceased: a gentler feeling crept
Upon us: surely rest is meet:
‘They rest,’ we said, ‘their sleep is sweet,’
And silence follow’d, and we wept.

Our voices took a higher range;
Once more we sang: ‘They do not die
Nor lose their mortal sympathy,
Nor change to us, although they change;

‘Rapt from the fickle and the frail
With gather’d power, yet the same,
Pierces the keen seraphic flame
From orb to orb, from veil to veil.’

Rise, happy morn, rise, holy morn,
Draw forth the cheerful day from night:
O Father, touch the east, and light
The light that shone when Hope was born.

Christmas 2
LXXVIII
Again at Christmas did we weave
The holly round the Christmas hearth;
The silent snow possess’d the earth,
And calmly fell our Christmas-eve:

The yule-clog sparkled keen with frost,
No wing of wind the region swept,
But over all things brooding slept
The quiet sense of something lost.
As in the winters left behind,
Again our ancient games had place,
The mimic picture's breathing grace,
And dance and song and hoodman-blind.

Who show'd a token of distress?
No single tear, no mark of pain:
O sorrow, then can sorrow wane?
O grief, can grief be changed to less?

O last regret, regret can die!
No—mixt with all this mystic frame,
Her deep relations are the same,
But with long use her tears are dry.

Christmas 3

CV

To-night ungather'd let us leave
This laurel, let this holly stand:
We live within the stranger's land,
And strangely falls our Christmas-eve.

Our father's dust is left alone
And silent under other snows:
There in due time the woodbine blows,
The violet comes, but we are gone.

No more shall wayward grief abuse
The genial hour with mask and mime,
For change of place, like growth of time,
Has broke the bond of dying use.

Let cares that petty shadows cast,
By which our lives are chiefly proved,
A little spare the night I loved,
And hold it solemn to the past.

But let no footstep beat the floor,
Nor bowl of wassail mantle warm;
For who would keep an ancient form
Thro’ which the spirit breathes no more?

Be neither song, nor game, nor feast;
Nor harp be touch’d, nor flute be blown;
No dance, no motion, save alone
What lightens in the lucid east

Of rising worlds by yonder wood.
Long sleeps the summer in the seed;
Run out your measured arcs, and lead
The closing cycle rich in good.

The extracts printed above are quite long: each describes the celebration of Christmas in a different year. When you read through them, you should notice that the tone of the sections is very different. The fourth line of the first stanza, in each instance, reads:

XXIX.  ‘How dare we keep our Christmas-eve’
XXX.   ‘And sadly fell our Christmas-eve’
LXXVII. ‘And calmly fell our Christmas-eve’
CV.    ‘And strangely falls our Christmas-eve’

These lines are very similar (particularly those from XXX, LXXVII, and CV). The line from XXIX asks how Hallam’s family and friends dare try to celebrate Christmas in his absence, and then afterwards, we see a progression from ‘sadly’, to ‘calmly’, to ‘strangely’. You should also note that the example from CV is in the present tense rather than the past tense. Read the extracts through carefully, and think about the following:
• Do you think that each of the cantos is in accordance with the adjective used to describe the coming of Christmas Eve in the fourth line of the first stanza? How is XXX ‘sad’? How is LXXVII ‘calm’? How is CV ‘strange’?
• Are these developments reflected in the language and style of the poem?
• Are they also reflected in the narrative sense?
• The final line of CV is ‘The closing cycle rich in good’. We have looked at how In Memoriam might be cyclic in terms of its form: do you think the process of mourning reflected here is cyclic? What arguments can you think of in favour of this perspective? And what arguments can you think of against it?
• Do you think the poem represents a sort of ‘moving on’? How does it achieve this? Or alternatively, how does the poem express the difficulty of moving on?
• In Memoriam is, without question, a profoundly sad poem. Now you have read and studied it, how do you think this sadness is achieved and maintained? Do you think it changes as the poem moves on?