Alfred, Lord Tennyson

*In Memoriam*

**Possible Lines of Approach**

**Notes on Approaching *In Memoriam***
- Historical and biographical context
- Form, structure, and genre
- Themes: Science, religion, homoeroticism

**Notes on Sections of Interest**

**Questions for Discussion**

**Critical Viewpoints / Reception History**
- Overview
- Victorian science
- Homoeroticism

**Possible Lines of Approach**

- Representative status of *IM* for the Victorian era, poet laureateship
- *IM* and the culture of mourning, public and private, mourning process, melancholia
- Form and structure of *IM*, composition over 17 years, issue of unity vs. division
- Poetics: tetrameter, *abba* rhyme scheme, repetition, use of apostrophe
- Comparison with other elegies (e.g. Milton’s “Lycidas,” Shelley’s *Adonais*)
- Comparison with other autobiographical or “confessional” poems
- Comparison with the pastoral tradition (Sections 21-25, 37-38, 89, 95, 100-103)
- *IM* as an expression of Victorian religious doubt (Prologue, Sections 33-36, 50-56, 124 to end)
- *IM* as a reaction to nineteenth-century developments in science (Sections 54-56, 118, 120, 123, 127-128)
- *IM* as a poem of homoeroticism and/or romantic male friendship (Sections 60-65, 93)
- *IM* and the difficulties of language (Sections 5, 20, 37, 48, 75, 77, 93, 95)

**Notes on Approaching *In Memoriam***

**Historical and biographical context**

It is nearly impossible to overemphasize the extent to which *In Memoriam* shaped the Victorians’ understanding of themselves, and how subsequent generations have understood them. As noted in the *Broadview Anthology of British Literature* introduction, “the poem captured the mood of the era, alternating between faith in science and faith in religion, and reflecting the hopes, doubts, and beliefs of the Victorians.” Tennyson later commented, acknowledging that his purpose was broader than recording his own experience of loss, “‘I’ is not always the author speaking of himself, but the voice of the
human race speaking thro’ him.”¹ Many Victorians had begun to privately question the tenets of Christianity. Developments in geology and natural history made it possible to envision a world whose surface and inhabitants were the product of natural forces operating over eons, as opposed to the result of the biblical Creation over six days. Their own lives were marked by the forces of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism. This paradigm shift caused a crisis of faith among many Victorians—or perhaps their lapsing faith enabled the eventual acceptance of scientific theories. *IM* records the anguish associated with this crisis, along with its resolution into a more or less conventional Christianity. The poem describes not only the passing of Arthur Hallam, but the passing of a time when the sea of faith was strong, to use the words of Matthew Arnold, Tennyson’s contemporary. *IM* provided comfort for many Victorians in mourning (Queen Victoria, a widow after the death of her husband Albert in 1861, remarked to Tennyson that next to her Bible, *IM* was her comfort), and offered a new kind of spirituality in an age of doubt.

At its heart, *IM* remains centered on the figure of Arthur Hallam. Tennyson and Hallam first met in 1829 at Cambridge, where they both became members of the group of intellectuals known as the Cambridge Apostles. Hallam was regarded as one of the most gifted figures at Cambridge at the time of Tennyson’s arrival, and his friendship with the young Tennyson was essential at a time when his family life caused great emotional and financial strain. Among other misfortunes, Tennyson’s alcoholic father died in 1831, and the young Tennyson was forced to leave Cambridge to head the household in Somersby, Lincolnshire (an unusual role for one who was not the eldest son). Hallam, on the other hand, came from a family whose place in the world was secure, and Tennyson alludes to this disparity in their backgrounds when the speaker compares his spirit to “some poor girl whose heart is set / On one whose rank exceeds her own” (60.3-4). This financial disparity led to conflict within the Hallam family when Arthur fell in love with and became engaged to Tennyson’s sister Emily. Arthur’s death, though, was deeply felt by many besides Tennyson. Sir Charles Tennyson, the poet laureate’s grandson, wrote, “The Cambridge circle had for so long regarded [Arthur] as their centre. With his vivacity, unselfishness and breadth of interests he touched all their lives at so many points, that they seemed almost to have lost a part of themselves.”² William Ewart Gladstone, the future Prime Minister (who was at an earlier period of Hallam’s life as close a friend as Tennyson became in Hallam’s university years), wrote after Hallam’s death, “When much time has elapsed, when most bereavements will be forgotten, he will still be remembered, and his place, I fear, will be felt to be still vacant, singularly, as his mind was calculated by its native tendencies to work powerfully and for good, in an age full of import to the nature and destinies of man.”³ Yet if Hallam was unable to fulfill his promise and become one of the most influential minds of the age, *In Memoriam*, the marker of his “still vacant” place, became perhaps the most important text of Victorian culture.

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³ Ibid., 306.
As an elegy written on the sudden death of a young man, *IM* is inevitably compared with Milton’s “Lycidas” and Shelley’s *Adonais*. Yet Edward King, the subject of Milton’s poem, was not a close friend of Milton, and King would hardly be remembered today if not for Milton. Neither were Shelley and Keats closely acquainted, and while Keats went on, of course, to be considered among the greatest poets of the English language, up until the publication of *Adonais* in 1829 (Keats had died in 1821, and Shelley wrote *Adonais* in the same year) Keats was a relatively obscure poet. Thus, *IM* differs from these predecessors in the intimacy of the two men, and in that Hallam would likely have become an influential figure. Students may consider whether the text of *IM* shows signs of the closeness of Tennyson’s bond to his subject (see Question 1).

Nor is the fact that *IM* is a poem about mourning irrelevant to its representative status. For the Victorians, mourning was a highly regulated ritual among middle- and upper-class families, necessitating the wearing of specific clothes, staying at home and refraining from certain social calls and events, and oftentimes maintaining a sentimental keepsake of the deceased, such as a lock of hair. Any failure to conform to these rigid social codes might attract comment. On the other hand, grief that was expressed openly or ostentatiously, that went beyond what was “proper,” was liable to be held insincere. The death of a close relative or spouse thus constituted a personal and a public trial, as well as affording one the opportunity to show one’s good breeding in the affective realm.

The Victorian obsession with mourning in some case marked a turn inward from political to personal concerns, even a willful ignorance of political problems. The 1840s were a turbulent decade politically: intellectuals debated the “Condition of England” in the new industrial age; the Chartist movement demanded electoral and social change, sometimes violently; a terrible famine struck Ireland; across the Continent, rebellions overturned monarchies and governments. However, Tennyson, speaking for the English middle class, was able to write,

Well roars the storm to those that hear
A deeper voice across the storm,
Proclaiming social truth shall spread,
And justice, ev’n tho’ thrice again
The red fool-fury of the Seine
Should pile her barricades with dead. (127: 3-8)

Nor does *IM* pay much attention to the Woman Question or to imperial concerns. The subject of his previous major work, *The Princess*, had been the education of women, and many of his lyrics evoke oriental settings; it seems fitting that the poem which earned Tennyson the poet laureateship and became so deeply ingrained within Victorian culture, should focus intensely on middle-class masculinity in relation to science and religion, and only deal obliquely with issues of gender, race, and class. The publication of *IM* might be said to mark the beginning of high Victorianism, with Britain having secured a dominant position within Europe, and the middle class having become the most powerful within
Britain. Strong male homosocial bonds within the ascendant British middle class, so resoundingly celebrated in *IM*, were also a key to its national and global success.

Form, structure, and genre

While many have considered *In Memoriam* Tennyson’s greatest poem, critics have nevertheless disagreed on how, or even if, the poem should be read as a whole. Some find that the poem can only be appreciated in its progress from Prologue to Epilogue through 131 sections or cantos; others prefer the briefer moments of lyric intensity, judging Tennyson’s arrangement of the whole (or more harshly, his gratuitous padding out of the work) to be of far lesser significance. If some students, then, find the poem difficult to grasp because of its length, they may be reassured that some scholars have felt a not dissimilar frustration, and may be encouraged instead to find particular sections or stanzas that resonate with them.⁴

Of course, this issue of whether *IM* is decidedly more or decidedly less than the sum of its parts stems from its unusual form and composition. Tennyson noted, “the sections were written at many different places, and as the phases of our intercourse came to my memory and suggested them. I did not write them with any view of weaving them into a whole, or for publication, until I found that I had written so many.”⁵ While some have suspected that these remarks are disingenuous, the fact remains that almost 17 years passed between the composition of the first few lyrics soon after Hallam’s death and the eventual “weaving” and publication of the full poem. Some of the lyrics were composed in the shock of discovering Hallam’s death (Section 9, the first lyric of the “ship” group, was the first written), others much later (the Prologue was the last to be completed, in 1849). Only three years, however, elapse within the chronology described by the poem—a span of time comparable to the four years during which Tennyson and Hallam had known each other. Students may be asked (see Question 1) what gives a more accurate or effective picture of the experience of mourning, or any deep emotion: brief, intense, but isolated expressions of pain, longing, doubt, or confusion, or the conscious arrangement or “weaving” of these individual moments, long after the initial grief has passed, and with the benefit of hindsight?

The poem’s greatest unifying principle is its unusual stanza form, now commonly called the *In Memoriam* stanza, though it had been used several times previously. Every four line stanza is rhymed *abba* in lines of iambic tetrameter. Most long poems in English on serious subjects are written in blank verse (as are “Lycidas” and *Adonais*), the longer lines and unrhymed endings regarded as being suitable to discursive ponderings. It has widely been regarded as a feat of Tennysonian virtuosity that he was able to compose a long poem entirely in these short stanzas, and, in the words of T.S. Eliot, “never

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⁴ See the introduction in Timothy Peltason’s *Reading In Memoriam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) for an excellent discussion of the issue and an argument in favor of reading the poem as a whole; also included in Erik Gray’s 2004 Norton Critical Edition of *IM*.

monotony or repetition.” The shorter lines have several effects. Most prominently, the use of tetrameter allies IM with poetry of a simpler register: ballads, nursery rhymes, songs—but also hymns. Many have heard a note of reticence in the clipped lines. As Erik Gray writes of the frequently grammatically incomplete lines, “Tennyson emphasizes the brokenness of the tetrameter stanza, the way that each line falls short of his emotion.”

Students should be asked to read (and re-read) aloud at least a few stanzas to hear the effect of the poem’s meter and rhyme. Many critics have attempted to describe and even mimic the complex effects of this abba stanza. Christopher Ricks writes that it can “circle moaning in the air” [Section 12], returning to its setting out, and with fertile circularity staying off its deepest terror of arrival at desolation and indifference. It is a stanza which rises to a momentary chime and then fades—but does not fade into despair or vacuity, only into dimness and regret, since after all (after all its lines) there comes the distant rhyme.

In Sarah Gates’ excellent discussion, “The Stanza Form of In Memoriam,” she argues that the fourth rhyme entails motion forward as well as return; a spiral model to Ricks’ “circularity”:

The movement, then, is one of vacillation (a to bb, and back to a), of gesturing backward (a ↔ a), and of leading beyond (bb → a). Rather than characterize this movement as a circle, I would call it a spiral, a figure that includes the backward forward gesturing of vacillation, the repetition risking stasis (the central concentration [of the inner couplet]), but also the outer diffusion, the movement beyond. The ends do not quite meet: the first “a” raises the anticipation of the second, but the intervening couplet interrupts the closure, or deflects the rhyme, so that the second “a” recollects, but differs from, the first.

When performing close readings of lyrics, students should be asked to compare the effects of the rhyme, both inner and outer, and determine whether the intervening couplet complements, contrasts with, or “deflects” the enfolding couplet (see Question 3).

The poem is also woven into a whole by the many repetitions and recurring themes and images, which Gates considers another form of spiraling. (Repetition in general, though, is characteristic of Tennyson.) There are, for example, the sections set at Christmastime (28-30, 78, 104-105), the sections depicting Hallam’s house (7, 119), the sections addressed to the Yew tree (2, 39—alluded to by Sylvia Plath in her “The Moon and the Yew Tree” and “Little Fugue”), the sections beginning “Risest thou thus, dim dawn, again” on the anniversaries of Hallam’s death (72, 99). There are the repeated

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8 Christopher Ricks, “In Memorium, 1850” from In Memoriam, ed. Erik Gray (New York: Norton, 2004), 172-188. 185-186.
personifications of Sorrow (3, 39, 59) and Sleep (4, 43, 68, 71). Students may discuss whether the speaker of the poem, by returning to these subjects, marks a change in attitude, a “working through” of grief, or regresses to, even wallows in melancholy (see Question 2). Certain words or phrases are emphasized through repetition: “far off” (1, 54, 95, 129, Epilogue), “strange” (13-14, 41, 71, 95, 101-105; cf. Question 3), “clasp” (1, 7, 10, 37, 47, 84-85, 88, 93; cf. Question 4). And besides these recurrences on the scale of the whole poem, there are frequent immediate repetitions of words and phrases. Several times the interior couplet of the stanza is a near repetition, as in “Sleep, gentle heavens, before the prow; / Sleep, gentle winds, as he sleeps now” (9. 14-15) and the famous “An infant crying in the night: / An infant crying for the light” (54. 19-20). Phrases like the “flower to flower,” “snow to snow,” “April on to April,” “May to May” found in Section 22 appear throughout the poem. It has been argued that these repetitions mimic the slow, gradual process, feeding on itself, of both mourning on the individual scale, and evolution on the global scale—and in the latter case, an echo of the Biblical “ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

And yet effects such as these, in the view of Christopher Ricks, still do not make *IM* a cohesive whole: “Unifying principles which would be adequate to a short poem […] cannot take the strain they are asked to bear if we press them to take responsibility for the unity of a poem as long, various, ranging, and uneven as *In Memoriam*.” Readers like Ricks value the poem’s impressive range of moods and subjects over any supposed unity. It is the length of the poem, the breadth of its concerns—as well as the depth of its personal feeling—that distinguishes *IM* from previous elegies, most notably Milton’s “Lycidas” and Shelley’s *Adonais* (its publication in 1829 was sponsored by the Cambridge Apostles—R.M. Milnes, Hallam, and Tennyson). Instead of the more or less smooth linear progress of these earlier poems from grief to consolation, the grief and doubt of *IM*’s speaker is not so easily dispelled, dilating to encompass the grief of a nation that was losing its religious faith, and solipsistically turning in on itself to suspect a note of insincerity in its verses (see Question 1). Instead of Shelley’s repeated injunctions to weep (and “weep anew!”) for the loss of Keats, Tennyson writes, “I sometimes hold it half a sin / To put in words the grief I feel” (5. 1-2). *IM* is more expansive in form, but more reticent in tone.

*IM* is similar to “Lycidas” and *Adonais* in their occasion, the sudden death of a young male acquaintance; it is also similar in that it contains elements of pastoral. But while nature is made to play a direct role in mourning with and ultimately consoling the speakers of these earlier poems, the role of Nature and the pastoral is much more ambiguous in *IM*. In Sections 21-25, for example, the pastoral tradition alienates the speaker, rather than accommodating him. The climax of the speaker’s anguish at a Nature that offers no compensation for the loss of an individual person, or even an entire species, comes in Sections 54-56. If Nature is truly “red in tooth and claw” (56. 15), then Man becomes reduced to “A monster then, a dream, / a discord” (56. 21-22). Yet in Section 95, often called the climax of the poem, the speaker experiences a mystical union with Hallam—though not without doubts—within a pastoral setting. Nature, in *IM*, then,

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reflects both the influence of Romantic pastoralism, as well as Victorian anxieties over recent scientific theories that overthrew the unquestioned belief in Providence and a God of Love (see Question 5).

Other genres beside pastoral elegy have been proposed for \( IM \). One of Tennyson’s working titles was \( \text{Fragments of an Elegy} \), and Donald Hair has claimed that “the fragment […] is the essential form of the work.”\(^{11}\) \( IM \) can thus be aligned with other “fragments” of nineteenth-century culture, such as sculptural or poetic remnants of Greece and Rome, serialized novels, and in poetry, Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” and Tennyson’s own “The Eagle (A Fragment).” In discussions that also emphasize its lyric sections, it has been discussed as a sonnet sequence, along the lines of one of its most important poetic influences, the sonnets of Shakespeare. T.S. Eliot’s frequently quoted remark, that \( IM \) is “the concentrated diary of a man confessing himself,”\(^{12}\) can place the poem in the tradition of autobiography or spiritual autobiography, or as a precursor for the “confessional” poetry of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and John Berryman. But Tennyson himself cautioned against such a reading, stating, “It must be remembered […] that this is a poem, not an actual biography.”\(^{13}\) It is impossible, however, to deny the existence of specific autobiographical elements, including the departure of his family from their home in Somersby in Sections 100-103, and the marriage between his sister Cecilia and his friend Edmund Lushington, which concludes the work.

Themes: Science, religion, homoeroticism

Throughout the history of the poem’s reception, readers have noted Tennyson’s vital interest in science in \( IM \). The record of his weekly schedule demonstrates his genuine desire to keep abreast of scientific development: “Monday. History, German. / Tuesday. Chemistry, German. / Wednesday. Botany, German. / Thursday. Electricity, German. / Friday. Animal Physiology, German. / Saturday. Mechanics. / Sunday. Theology.”\(^{14}\) Although Darwin’s \( \text{Origin of Species} \) was not published until 1859, almost a decade after the publication of \( IM \), the poem is often discussed in relation to Darwinism and the theory of evolution. Sections 54-56, 118, 128, and the Epilogue contain the poem’s response to an evolutionary model of the universe not centered on the creation of the human race. The speaker progresses—or evolves—from an almost nihilistic despair to a hopeful faith in the birth of a superior race, of which Hallam was “a noble type” (Epilogue). It is important for students to understand that Darwin did not originate the theory of evolution or the transmutation of species from one form to another. Darwin’s innovation was the theory of natural selection; Lamarck’s theory of the transmission of acquired adaptations from parent to offspring had been a topic of scientific discussion throughout the early


\(^{13}\) Hallam, Lord Tennyson, “In Memoriam” from \( \text{In Memoriam} \), ed. Erik Gray (New York: Norton, 2004), 105-110. 105, author’s emphasis.

nineteenth century, and had been recently popularized by Robert Chambers in his *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844). But the greatest scientific influence on Tennyson was Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* (also a large influence on Darwin), published between 1830 and 1833. Based on geological evidence, Lyell argued that the Earth was far older than the few thousand years that had been calculated on the basis of a literal reading of the Bible, that its surface had changed vastly, and that it was continuing to change (although these changes were imperceptible and gradual). The wonders of Nature could be explained by mechanistic physical laws operating over eons; they did not provide proof for the existence of a transcendent being.

Lyell’s radical extension of the scope of time also opened a way to understand that whole species in the past had died out, leaving behind their fossil remains, as well as a non-Biblical way in which to imagine the possible extinction of the human race. Besides challenging belief in a God who created a harmonious world, the theories that would lead to natural selection also removed humankind from its ultimate position in the history of the world. Thus the speaker is led to ask, “[S]hall he, / Man, her last work, who seem’d so fair, […] Be blown about the desert dust, / Or seal’d within the iron hills?” (56.9-20).

Yet if the permanence of human existence could no longer be taken for granted, the possible improvement of the human race became far more imaginable. If Victorians had lost their faith in a transcendent God, they could embrace a faith in human progress.

Students should understand that Darwin did not explicitly endorse the view that evolution was progressive, that more highly evolved species were inherently superior (as opposed to better adapted environmentally) to their predecessors. *IM*, however, clearly does espouse such a view. Section 118 reads as a credo of inevitable progress, ending, “Move upward, working out the beast, / And let the ape and tiger die.” The future evolution of the species provides consolation for the recent loss of one single, though highly gifted, individual. From this nexus of biological evolution and anthropocentric progress also came the late-nineteenth-century obsession with social Darwinism, and the eugenics movement in the first half of the twentieth century. Although Tennyson’s faith in progress had been shaken by Hallam’s death, it seems to emerge stronger, just as his imagined religious doubter who “after toil and storm / Mayst seem to have reach’d a purer air” (33. 1-2). Tennyson concedes, alluding to mid-nineteenth-century theories of degradationism or degenerationism, that “throned races may degrade” (128. 7), but concludes that “all […] Is toil coöperant to an end” (128. 24). *IM* has long been regarded as the most representative Victorian poem in no small part for its enduring faith in the advancement of the human race—a faith that has assuredly strengthened many spirits, but also one that some historians feel led to the world wars which shattered that belief for future generations.

*IM* also, of course, reflects the widespread questioning of Christian dogma among the Victorians. T.S. Eliot’s oft-quoted comment on *IM*’s religiosity—“Its faith is a poor thing, but its doubt is a very intense experience” (138)—might very well apply to mid-nineteenth-century belief in general—except that for many, to be quietly agnostic or atheistic, even within the clergy, was not an intense experience at all. But perhaps readers over the last century have overestimated the doubt expressed in *IM*. Many contemporary reviewers regarded it as a deeply religious poem. Charles Kingsley (remembered for his
ideal of “muscular Christianity”) regarded IM as “the noblest English Christian poem which several centuries have seen.” The “very intense experience” of doubt, in many readers’ minds, strengthens instead of weakens the poem’s faith. In lines written describing Hallam, but certainly a model for Tennyson himself as well, he writes,

He fought his doubts and gather’d strength,
He would not make his judgment blind,
He faced the specters of the mind
And laid them: thus he came at length
To find a stronger faith his own. (96. 13-18)

Students can discuss for themselves whether the faith expressed in the latter sections of the poem is a genuinely “stronger faith” for all the doubts expressed in the early and middle parts (cf. Question 8).

Another area that has provoked much debate is the homoeroticism of IM. Students should be given something of the context: in the mid-Victorian period (things began to change in the late Victorian period), although homosexual acts certainly did take place, there was little or no concept of a gay male (or female) identity. Furthermore, strong affective bonds that could be expressed in words and gestures that might be interpreted as homoerotic, if not homosexual, in our day, were to the Victorians commonplace. This does not mean, however, that the love Tennyson expressed for Hallam attracted no comment. An anonymous reviewer for The Times, most likely Manley Hopkins, father of the proto-modernist poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, protested:

Very sweet and plaintive these verses are [74. 5-12, where the speaker addresses Hallam as “dearest”]; but who would not give them a feminine application? Shakespeare may be considered the founder of this style in English. In classical and Oriental poetry it is unpleasantly familiar. His mysterious sonnets present the startling peculiarity of transferring every epithet of womanly endearment to a masculine friend,—his master-mistress, as he calls him by a compound epithet, harsh as it is disagreeable.16

The discomfort registered in the review was absent in almost all other contemporaries of Tennyson. Nevertheless, Tennyson defended himself with his famous quip, “If any body thinks I ever called him ‘dearest’ in his life, they are much mistaken, for I never even called him ‘dear.’”17 Few critics of IM (including those influenced by queer theory) have argued that Tennyson was being disingenuous and in fact shared what we would now term a homosexual relationship with Hallam; rather, those critics who have explored this side of the poem have sought to understand how homoerotic desire is produced,

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contained, thwarted, sublimated, and transformed within the poem (see Critical Viewpoints section and Question 9 for more details).

Lastly, *IM* is a poem profoundly concerned with its use of language. The speaker doubts his ability to put into words what he feels for his deceased friend, “For words, like Nature, half reveal / And half conceal the Soul within” (5. 3-4). *IM* can thus be aligned with modernist and post-modernist works that self-reflexively question their own language, as in the works of Joyce, Eliot, Woolf, Pound, and Beckett. For Tennyson, though, words are only half concealing, and, in a later unfinished poem, he prefers reticence to silence, connecting his work with the poetry of Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop. The final sentence of the “ship” group, “And I can speak a little then” (19. 16), might be read positively as Tennyson’s ideal. Section 48 is also often cited in discussions of Tennyson’s thoughts on language. But language, for Tennyson, is not only a crude instrument that must be carefully controlled, but a force that can conquer death, as in the celebrated “trance” of Section 95:

So word by word, and line by line,
The dead man touch’d me from the past
And all at once it seem’d at last
The living soul was flash’d on mine. (33-36)

**Notes on Sections of Interest**

**Prologue**
The Prologue was the last part to be composed, in 1849. It frames the poem in terms of Christianity, and its short, stately phrases have been compared to the biblical Psalms. It also introduces the main theological concerns: a God of “immortal Love,” and the relation of religion to science (“Our little systems have their day” [17]; “Let knowledge grow from more to more” [25]).

**Sections 1-8**
These first sections are notable for their use of apostrophe, as the speaker addresses the Yew tree, Sorrow, his own heart, and Hallam’s house. This can be read as indicative of the speaker’s disorientation or desperation, and as inaugurating the vacillating movement that is characteristic of the poem. T.S. Eliot singled out Section 7 (“Dark house, by which once more I stand,” actually one of the last composed) for praise, calling it “great poetry, economical of words, a universal emotion in what could only be an English town” (135). Sections 6 and 8 provide the first of many comparisons of Hallam and the speaker’s

18 The unfinished poem, “Reticence,” written in 1869, begins,
Not to Silence would I build
A temple in her naked field:
Not to her would raise a shrine:
She no goddess is of mine;
But to one of finer sense,
relationship to heterosexual couples. Section 5 introduces the theme of language and the ability to express powerful emotion, developed in Sections 20, 37, 48, 75, 77, and 95.

Sections 9-19
This group focuses on the ship that bears Hallam’s body from Trieste, Italy, to England (Hallam died in Vienna). It again uses apostrophe, but settles on the concrete image of the boat, and the speaker begins to derive some consolation. Section 9 was among the first composed, written soon after Tennyson received news of Hallam’s death and the transportation of his body. The first stanza of Section 13 (“Tears of the widower, when he sees”) was particularly admired by Queen Victoria, who penciled in appropriate gender markers for her situation after the death of Prince Albert. Virginia Woolf also alludes to these lines in the “Time Passes” section of *To the Lighthouse*.

Sections 21-25
Tennyson here uses and revises the conventions of pastoral to remember his time spent with Hallam. See also Sections 37-38. Later in the poem, Tennyson describes actual places instead of the imaginary idealized pastoral scene, such as Cambridge in Section 87, the Tennyson family home at Somersby in Sections 89, 95, 100-103.

Section 27
Students may be surprised to learn that the lines “‘Tis better to have loved and lost / Than never to have loved at all”—now a cliché of romantic love—originated in a male poet remembering his male friend. The couplet is repeated in Section 85.

Sections 28-30, 78, 104-106
These sections describe the three Christmases after Hallam’s death. Comparing these sections together is a good way of tracking the gradual progress of the speaker’s eventual consolation, from the first Christmas (“This year I slept and woke with pain, / I almost wish’d no more to wake” [28: 13-14]), to the ecstatic Section 106 on the third New Year (“Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky”). A.C. Bradley considered Section 78 to mark the turning point of the poem, although he acknowledged that “the transition [is not] so marked as to strike a reader who was not looking for signs of transition.”

Sections 54-57
These sections show the impact on the speaker’s religious faith of the scientific developments that would lead to modern ways of thinking about evolution, and are hence among the most quoted in the poem. They represent the low-water mark of the speaker’s faith, and Tennyson remarked that Section 57 was “too sad for an ending,” although the poem does seem to briefly end there. Tennyson was influenced by Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology*, which argued:

… the reader has only to reflect on what we have said of the habitations and the stations of organic beings in general, and to consider them in relation to those effects … resulting from the igneous and aqueous causes now in action, and he

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will immediately perceive that, amidst the vicissitudes of the earth’s surface, species cannot be immortal, but must perish one after the other, like the individuals which compose them.\textsuperscript{20}

\textbf{Sections 60-65}  
These sections focus intensely on Tennyson’s love for Hallam, using analogies of class difference, which may be read metaphorically for Hallam’s superiority in life and death, but also reflect Hallam’s higher social position, which caused the delay in marriage between Tennyson’s sister Emily and Hallam. Sections 61 and 62 allude to Shakespeare’s Sonnet 116 (cf. Critical Viewpoints section), especially its final couplet, “If this be error and upon me proved, / I never writ, nor no man ever loved.”

\textbf{Section 95}  
Often considered the climax of the poem, this section records the mystical union Tennyson experienced while at his family home in Somersby. It occurs while the speaker reads old letters of Hallam’s, and is ended by doubt. Tennyson noted, “The trance came to an end in a moment of critical doubt, but the doubt was dispelled by the glory of the dawn of the ‘boundless day.’” Doubt is further dealt with in Section 96.

\textbf{Sections 115-131}  
The closing sections mark the speaker’s reconciliation of faith with doubt (Section 124), acknowledgement of scientific theories (geology in 118 and 123; evolution in 118 and 127-128—Tennyson noted that Section 120 was “spoken ironically against mere materialism, not against evolution”) with belief in a Christian God of Love (126). Sections 115 and 116 depict a much more optimistic spring than in 38-39 and 86-88. Instead of God and Nature being at strife as in Section 55, the speaker now imagines Hallam “mix’d with God and Nature” (130. 11).

\textbf{Epilogue}  
Many readers have found the \textit{epithalamium} for the wedding between Tennyson’s sister Cecilia and his friend Edward Lushington incongruous and unconvincing, but the last stanzas are often discussed. The speaker calls Hallam a “noble type,” connecting an evolutionary model based on progress with a Christian typological model where Hallam is a prefiguration of the Second Coming, just as certain Old Testament events were taken as “types” of New Testament events. Hallam is thus linked with Christ—even equated, some have argued.

\textbf{Questions for Discussion}  

1. How does \textit{IM} compare with “Lycidas” and \textit{Adonais}? Does \textit{IM}’s greater length make it a more or a less effective elegy? A more or less effective memorial? How does the movement from grief to consolation in \textit{IM} differ from its predecessors?

Does *IM* more realistically portray the mourning process or does it show regressive melancholia?

2. Does *IM* read more effectively as the unmediated record of an individual’s moments of intense emotion, or as the conscious work of an artist attempting to create a cohesive and satisfying whole? How is this aesthetic issue (part versus whole, unconsciousness versus consciousness) raised in works from other authors and periods, for example Romantic lyric (Wordsworth, Coleridge), Early Modern epics and sonnet sequences (*The Faerie Queen, Paradise Lost, Shakespeare’s Sonnets*), modern and post-modern fragmented narratives and poems (*Ulysses, The Waves, The Waste Land, Pound’s Cantos*)?

3. In Section 13, what is the relation of inner and outer rhyme, past and present, the speaker and the ship bearing Hallam? What is the effect of the enjambment in the first quatrain? Do the end rhymes of each stanza show stasis, vacillation, or gradual motion forward? (Many other sections, of course, are excellent for performing close readings of a sort that may give rise to this type of question.)

4. Does *IM*—and its depiction of natural and human history—progress linearly (toward “one far-off divine event” [Epilogue])? If so, is its progress long and gradual, or marked by the catastrophic destruction of a Nature “red in tooth and claw” (56)? Should its conception of time perhaps be better thought of as cyclical, with the recurring memories, seasons, and anniversaries marking both continuity and change? Or is it fundamentally regressive, obsessively returning to the mourning of one loss, or even further back to some unconscious melancholia?

5. What are the different possible meanings of “far off,” “strange,” and “stranger”? (See Sections 1, 13-14, 41, 54, 71, 95, 101-105, 129, Epilogue.) When do these words imply complete separation? When do these words imply possible reunion in the future? How would the Victorian conception of a time and place “far off” be different from notions of these things in earlier eras?

6. What is meant by “clasping”? At times the imagery is of clasped hands (7, 10, 85), reflecting the frequent appearance of hands, but at other times, the actors are abstract concepts (“Let Love clasp Grief” [1. 9]; “comfort clasp’d in truth reveal’d” [37. 22]; “Thy passion clasps a secret joy” [88. 8]). Is clasping simply a sign of unity, or does it also imply “separateness or division as well”?²¹ Does the speaker’s focus on clasping stem from faith or doubt? From a world guided by Love or a world of isolated individuals? Should the clasping be read as erotic? How is clasping figured in the rhyme scheme of each stanza?

7. How is the role of Nature in *IM* different from the role of Nature in Romantic poetry, particularly Wordsworth? Does the mystical union portrayed in Section 95 show more faith in Nature than the doubt expressed in Sections 54-56? Can Wordsworth be imagined asking if “God and Nature” were “at strife” (55.5)? Might

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the Nature of Tennyson’s time offer new means of spiritual experience? How does Nature in IM compare with Caliban’s idea of Setebos in Browning’s poem?

8. Is the speaker’s faith “a poor thing,” in the words of T.S. Eliot, compared to his doubt? Consider the Prologue’s assertions of faith, the musings on immortality, faith, and doubt in Sections 33-36, the spiritual crisis of Sections 50-56, and the final faith of Sections 124 to the end. Is the speaker’s faith religious or secular, or even idolatrous, elevating Hallam to the position of a god? How does Tennyson’s negotiation with faith in the Victorian age compare with Arnold’s in “Dover Beach,” or Carlyle’s in the “Everlasting No” section of Sartor Resartus?

9. Is the speaker’s love for Hallam homoerotic? To what degree (if any) the frequent appearance of hands, bodies, and abstract concepts touching, embracing, and clasping be read erotically? How does the speaker’s desire for Hallam compare with other erotic poetry, such as the sonnets of Shakespeare, or Barrett Browning?

Critical Viewpoints/Reception History

Overview

Though Hallam Tennyson later claimed that “[a]t first the reviews of the volume were not on the whole sympathetic,” the reception of IM was overwhelmingly positive. George Henry Lewes, now remembered for being George Eliot’s partner, hailed Tennyson as the “greatest living poet,” and Coventry Patmore, author of The Angel in the House, enthused, “In our opinion, there is nothing nearly equal to the above [Section 103], in splendor of language and imagination, depth and classicality of thought and feeling, perfection of form, and completeness in every way, in the whole scope of English poetry.” IM was compared favorably with the works of poets of the past. Lewes considered it superior to “Lycidas,” and other reviewers placed it on the same level as Petrarch, Shakespeare, and Dante. Its historical status was immediately grasped in the first long review: “There are certain great epochs in the history of poetry [……] Our immediate impression upon the perusal of ‘In Memoriam’ was that it claimed a place in the very highest rank, and that it was the first poem of historical importance which has appeared since the ‘Excursion’ [by Wordsworth (1814)].” The Times review cited above in the Themes section was not representative, and it attracted vehement response. Neither was it entirely negative, as the reviewer admitted,

He has written 200 pages upon one person—in other words he has painted 120 miniatures of the same individual, with much happiness of expression, great

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24 Quoted in ibid., 114.
bloom and freshness of landscape illustration, and many touching scenes of busy and indoor life. English literature possesses no work which, in compass and unity, can be justly compared with *In Memoriam*.²⁵

And the *Literary Gazette* was the only review which “distinguished itself by welcoming [...] ‘a female hand’ to ‘the Muses’ Banquet.’”²⁶ Although *IM* (and all subsequent editions during Tennyson’s lifetime) were published anonymously, it was common knowledge that the volume was Tennyson’s.

It is very largely true to say that *In Memoriam* won Tennyson the poet laureateship. Wordsworth, the previous poet laureate, had died in April of 1850, about a month before the publication of Tennyson’s work. While Tennyson was already a well-known poet, he was by no means universally acknowledged to be England’s finer poet. His previous major poem, *The Princess* (1847), had received mixed reviews. The immediate success of *IM*—Prince Albert was among its many admirers—helped secure the position for Tennyson.

The poem remained extraordinarily popular for years. Published in June, it was in its fourth edition by January of the next year. A total of 30 editions would be published during Tennyson’s lifetime.²⁷ But the middlebrow popularity that resulted from *IM* and Tennyson’s work as poet laureate led to some resentment. The economist and essayist Walter Bagehot was one of Tennyson’s most prominent critics. Towards the turn of the century, Samuel Butler, who anticipated and in many cases exceeded subsequent contempt for all things Victorian, wrote in his *Notebook*,

> We said we knew Blake was no good because he learnt Italian at 60 in order to study Dante, and we knew Dante was no good because he was so fond of Virgil, and Virgil was no good because Tennyson ran him, and as for Tennyson—well, Tennyson went without saying.²⁸

For the first half of the twentieth century, modernist critics and writers defined their more hard-edged, lean aesthetic against what they considered overstuffed Victorian poetry, prose, and furniture. T.S. Eliot was one of the few to praise Tennyson, noting that in *IM*, “Tennyson’s technical competence is everywhere masterly and satisfying.”²⁹ Although the rest of Eliot’s perceptive essay provides useful insight into the content of *IM*, his comment worked to reinforce the view of Tennyson as a composer of sweet-sounding verse that did not require much thought. W.H. Auden, in 1945, famously called Tennyson the “stupidest” of all English poets, although he continued, “There was little about melancholia that [Tennyson] didn’t know; there was little else that he did.”³⁰ Paull F.

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²⁶ Ibid., 111.
Baum is representative of mid-twentieth-century prejudice against Victorian sentimentality, and *IM* as the embodiment of Victorian sentimentality, in a remarkably unsympathetic monograph on his poetry:

“In Memoriam” was certainly popular. It sold very well. It brought comfort and consolation to thousands of bereaved readers. For more than fifty years it rivaled Holy Writ in use and usefulness to Anglican and Evangelical clergymen. Nor is this popularity difficult to account for. Besides its sense of intimacy with the Laureate himself and its little domestic incidents, there was an easy appeal in its quotable beauties, its apparent simplicity (the language is almost always simple even when the meaning is obscure, and its elaborate passages are elaborate in a conventional style), its division into short sections to be read like chapters of the Bible and demanding little sustained attention, its vague religious ideas without the intrusion of dogma, its temptation to self-flattery in the familiar handling of high thoughts, or the illusion thereof, its falling in with later theological doubts and its hints of current scientific discussion, and above all its frank sentimental strain.31

From such a nadir, *IM* has risen steadily in critical repute. Martin Dodsworth’s 1969 “Patterns of Morbidity: Repetition in Tennyson’s Poetry” takes on the critical tradition that had condemned, sometimes with praise, Tennyson’s stylistic virtuosity. Tennyson, for Dodsworth, was a poet who used words to capture difficult psychological positions: “Far from being superficial (‘ornate,’ as Bagehot puts it), the Tennysonian style communicates a great and sometimes overwhelming intensity of feeling.”32 His essay remains one of the best analyses of Tennyson’s poetics. With the growing interest in Freud, *IM* provided a useful means of illustrating the ideas laid out in *Mourning and Melancholia*. But probably the greatest reason for the rediscovery of *IM* as a poem worthy of critical attention was the resurgence of interest in Darwin. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Victorian science has been a rich topic of critical discussion, and readings generated by queer theory have ensured that *IM* will be read and taught by scholars for years to come.

**Victorian science**

“Nature red in tooth and claw” has become a fixture in discussions of Darwin’s impact on the Victorian mind, but most critics who analyze the “evolution” sections of *IM* focus on Charles Lyell. It is known that Tennyson read Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* in 1837, four years after he had begun writing what would become *In Memoriam*, while Darwin’s *Origin of Species* was not published until 1859, although he had begun to formulate his theory of natural selection in 1838. Lyell argued for a gradualist, or uniformitarian, view of the Earth, wherein land formations are constantly and gradually being built up and eroded away by the same natural forces that have acted uniformly over eons, perhaps for eternity, and that living things would inevitably have been affected by the change in the

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environment. This was in opposition to the catastrophist position represented by Georges Cuvier, who held that the Earth was shaped by catastrophic changes that could have occurred within a biblical span of time (i.e., several orders of magnitude less than geological chronology), and that after that time, the surface of the Earth had not been altered, and its species had not changed either. Both theories attempted to explain the fossils left behind in “scarped cliff and quarried stone” (56: 2), but the scrupulous evidence and argumentation presented by Lyell made believing in a creationist account based on a literal reading of the Bible, which might have been justified by catastrophism, a matter of faith, not science.

The classic text on IM and Lyell is Eleanor Bustin Mattes’ monograph *In Memoriam: The Way of a Soul* (1951). Writing before the out-of-order composition of IM’s sections had been documented, she argued,

[[In the early sections of *In Memoriam* he had assumed, with Wordsworth, that nature does testify to immortality, and had repeatedly affirmed the eternal quality of love. Lyell’s conclusions challenged both these premises, the first directly, the second implicitly; and the next phase of *In Memoriam* was the recording of Tennyson’s reaction to this shock.]

Recently, however, Michael Tomko has cautioned that “the relation between [Lyell and Tennyson] should be viewed as cooperative, not antagonistic.” He demonstrates that Lyell as well as Tennyson made an effort to convince the public that it was possible to accept the worldview of “deep time” while believing in God. In Tomko’s reading, the speaker’s journey from grief to consolation is mirrored by his initial obsession with the corporeal to a more proper understanding of the division between material and spiritual:

Lyell’s geology, far from introducing a crisis that needs to be overcome, provides a salutary demystification of dust that allows Tennyson to forego his “little systems” in order to experience mystically the spiritual qua spiritual and the physical qua physical. Lyell’s geology is only critical in so far as it is conciliatory, offering a means to overcome traditional Christian cosmology with dynamic spiritualism. (124)

*In Memoriam* has also been studied in relation to other sciences. While acknowledging that the laws of thermodynamics were formulated well after IM’s publication, Barri J. Gold sees IM’s images of waste and destruction as operating within the same framework as the Second Law of Thermodynamics (entropy, or disorder, can only increase or stay the same in a closed system), while both IM and the work of contemporary physicists imagined diffusion according to the First Law to compensate (energy is constant in a

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closed system; i.e., energy is transferred, not lost, during heat diffusion). Anna Henchman explores the tension between sensory perception and conceptual ideas in *IM*, particularly in relation to “the astronomical technique of parallax, which determines the distance of a star by measuring shifts in its apparent position due to the earth’s own revolution round the sun.” Similarly, “Each section of *In Memoriam* acts as a single perspective on Hallam’s death.” Students interested in the intersection of science and literature will find much of interest in *IM* and Tennyson’s work in general.

**Homoeroticism**

The two best queer readings of *IM* remain Christopher Craft’s “‘Descend, and Touch, and Enter’: Tennyson’s Strange Manner of Address” (1988) and Jeff Nunokawa’s “*In Memoriam* and the Extinction of the Homosexual” (1991). Craft’s densely written article covers much ground, but perhaps the most useful part for a survey course is his outline and analysis of the often phobic homoerotic attribution that has always hovered around *IM*’s reception. For Craft, more important than attributing a homosexual identity or homosexual acts to the author of *IM* is how the poem effects the “problematic not merely of desire between men but also of the desire, very urgent in the elegy, to speak it.” He reads the death of Hallam as both enabling and complicating homoerotic desire:

The elegiac mode disciplines the desire it also enables: on the one hand the sundering of death instigates an insistent reparational longing, on the other it claustrates the objects of this desire on the far side of a divide that interdicts touch even as it incites the desire for touching. An infinite desire is infinitely deferred, subject always to postponement, displacement, diffusion.

Desire is enmeshed in death and language, which Tennyson attempts to resolve through transferring that desire to Christ, but the elegy gives the “strong impression that Christ is at best a belated lover who functions as the devotional succedaneum of which Hallam is the great original.” Craft concludes,

*In Memoriam* refuses to complete its work of mourning […] Thus, in the sheer ferocity of its personal loss, as in the extreme extensiveness of its reparational hungering, Tennyson’s elegy manages to counterspeak its own submission to its culture’s heterosexualizing conventions […] *In Memoriam* remains at its end what it had been at its beginning—a desiring machine whose first motive is the reproduction of lost Hallam—and as such it continues to do what it has always done best. It keeps its desire by keeping its desire desiring.

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38 Ibid., 88.
39 Ibid., 93.
40 Ibid., 98.
Jeff Nunokawa connects homoeroticism to evolutionary discourse, contending that homoerotic desire represents an early stage on the way to heterosexual marriage. Instead of “keeping its [homoerotic] desire desiring,” Nunokawa (differing from Craft) argues that IM constructs a “version of heterosexuality characterized by the radical abandonment of a prior homoeroticism which also supplies the condition of its existence.”

Nunokawa’s finest work in the article involves a close reading of Sections 61 and 62 in relation to Shakespeare’s Sonnet 116. In his view, the speaker positions his devotion to Hallam as superior to Shakespearean desire; whereas Shakespeare’s speaker had proclaimed the permanence of his love, the elegist is able to give up his love, as “boys put away childish things to become husbands and fathers.” A possible essay topic for more advanced students would be to determine whether Craft or Nunokawa is right, whether homoerotic desire is outgrown or still present in the final heterosexual marriage.

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42 Ibid., 215.