

Tennyson's Poems

The poetry of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, is among the greatest of English literature. Many of his poems are mainstays of literature courses, and most have attracted copious critical attention. His poems are renowned for, among other things, their bold heroic narratives, their moving evocation of deep emotions, their skillful lyricism and cadences, and their memorable imagery.

Tennyson began writing verse when he was very young; he composed *The Devil and the Lady* when he was just fourteen, demonstrating ease of style and poetic vision beyond his years. The comedy of the poem easily moves into dark complexity. The year he went to Cambridge, he and his brother Charles published *Poems of Two Brothers* (1827). Most of the poems were written by Alfred, and almost all display deft irony and mature grimness unleavened by comic touches. Only two reviews of the book were published, and few copies sold.

At Cambridge, Tennyson penned the strange and accomplished “Timbuctoo.” A fully Romantic poem, it concerns the legendary African intellectual city and suggests that the magic it held was derived from the mind of man. The poem attracted the notice of the university, which awarded Tennyson the chancellor’s prize in 1829. At this time Tennyson entered the undergraduate intellectual club The Apostles and became close friends with Arthur Henry Hallam. The two planned to publish a volume of poems together, but Hallam’s father prohibited him from participating.

Thus, in 1830 Tennyson published his own *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*. It contained such works as the critical favorite “[Mariana](#),” “[The Kraken](#),” “The Dying Swan,” and “Ode to Memory.” Many of the poems were introspective and clearly the work of a young poet, but “Mariana” is certainly one of the most notable poems in his oeuvre. Reviews of this volume generally

were favorable, lauding Tennyson's experimental meter and melody.

Tennyson continued to write poems throughout the early 1830s. He published *Poems* in 1832. This volume included "The Lotos-Eaters," "[The Lady of Shalott](#)," "Hesperides," and "The Palace of Art." The Poetry Foundation states that "the volume is notable for its consideration of the opposed attractions of isolated poetic creativity and social involvement; the former usually turns out to be the more attractive course, since it reflected Tennyson's own concerns, but the poems demonstrate as well his feeling of estrangement in being cut off from his contemporaries by the demands of his art." Now considered a masterpiece, it received scathing contemporary reviews.

Tennyson was profoundly grieved when Hallam died in 1833, but he wrote some of his best work in the years after his friend's untimely death. These poems and others were contained in the profound two-volume *Poems*, published in 1842. The poems included "The Vision of Sin," "Locksley Hall," "[Tithonus](#)," "The Princess: A Medley," and "[Ulysses](#)." This time the reviews were extremely laudatory, and the poet's reputation was restored and cemented.

In 1850, after the publication of *In Memoriam*, dedicated to Hallam, Tennyson's fame was such that he was appointed the new poet laureate. He wrote poetry throughout the rest of his life. Late work included the twelve blank-verse poems on [King Arthur](#) and his knights comprising *The Idylls of the King* (1859), "Crossing the Bar," "The Charge of the Light Brigade," and "Maud."

Tennyson's reputation suffered somewhat in the first decades of the 20th century, but he is now generally recognized as the greatest poet of the Victorian Age and is sometimes considered one of the greatest poets in the history of the medium. One of his contemporaries had remarked upon the occasion of the

poet's 80th birthday, "He has expended the treasures of his native talent on broadening and deepening his own hold upon the English language, until that has become an instrument upon which he is able to play a greater variety of melodies to perfection than any other man."