**Alfred Lord Tennyson**

**"In Memoriam"**

**Prologue**

Strong Son of God, immortal Love,

   Whom we, that have not seen thy face,

   By faith, and faith alone, embrace,

Believing where we cannot prove;

Thine are these orbs of light and shade;

   Thou madest Life in man and brute;

   Thou madest Death; and lo, thy foot

Is on the skull which thou hast made.

Thou wilt not leave us in the dust:

   Thou madest man, he knows not why,

   He thinks he was not made to die;

And thou hast made him: thou art just.

Thou seemest human and divine,

   The highest, holiest manhood, thou.

   Our wills are ours, we know not how;

Our wills are ours, to make them thine.

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.

We have but faith: we cannot know;

   For knowledge is of things we see

   And yet we trust it comes from thee,

A beam in darkness: let it grow.

Let knowledge grow from more to more,

   But more of reverence in us dwell;

   That mind and soul, according well,

May make one music as before,

But vaster. We are fools and slight;

   We mock thee when we do not fear:

   But help thy foolish ones to bear;

Help thy vain worlds to bear thy light.

Forgive what seem’d my sin in me;

   What seem’d my worth since I began;

   For merit lives from man to man,

And not from man, O Lord, to thee.

Forgive my grief for one removed,

   Thy creature, whom I found so fair.

   I trust he lives in thee, and there

I find him worthier to be loved.

Forgive these wild and wandering cries,

   Confusions of a wasted youth;

   Forgive them where they fail in truth,

And in thy wisdom make me wise.

,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,

**Prologue:**

The poem begins as a tribute to and invocation of the “Strong Son of God.” Since man, never having seen God’s face, has no proof of His existence, he can only reach God through faith. The poet attributes the sun and moon (“these orbs or light and shade”) to God, and acknowledges Him as the creator of life and death in both man and animals. Man cannot understand why he was created, but he must believe that he was not made simply to die.

The Son of God seems both human and divine. Man has control of his own will, but this is only so that he might exert himself to do God’s will. All of man’s constructed systems of religion and philosophy seem solid but are merely temporal, in comparison to the eternal God; and yet while man can have knowledge of these systems, he cannot have knowledge of God. The speaker expresses the hope that “knowledge [will] grow from more to more,” but this should also be accompanied by a reverence for that which we cannot know.

The speaker asks that God help foolish people to see His light. He repeatedly asks for God to forgive his grief for “thy [God’s] creature, whom I found so fair.” The speaker has faith that this departed fair friend lives on in God, and asks God to make his friend wise.

,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,

**XXVIII**

The time draws near the birth of Christ:

The moon is hid; the night is still;

The Christmas bells from hill to hill

Answer each other in the mist.

Four voices of four hamlets round,

From far and near, on mead and moor,

Swell out and fail, as if a door

Were shut between me and the sound:

Each voice four changes on the wind,

That now dilate, and now decrease,

Peace and goodwill, goodwill and peace,

Peace and goodwill, to all mankind.

This year I slept and woke with pain,

I almost wish'd no more to wake,

And that my hold on life would break

Before I heard those bells again:

But they my troubled spirit rule,

For they controll'd me when a boy;

They bring me sorrow touch'd with joy,

The merry merry bells of Yule.

It is Christmas time, and the bells ring out in the hamlets. This year the poet slept and then awoke with pain and almost wished that he would never wake up again. The bells of Yule now bring “sorrow touch’d with joy.”

,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,

**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.

It is the second Christmas after Hallam’s death. There is a quiet sense of “something lost,” but loud tears and expressions of pain are not present. There are games and dance and song. The poet wonders if sorrow truly can wane, grief “changed to less?” It seems possible to return to life and hope.

,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,

**CIV**

The time draws near the birth of Christ;

The moon is hid, the night is still;

A single church below the hill

Is pealing, folded in the mist.

A single peal of bells below,

That wakens at this hour of rest

A single murmur in the breast,

That these are not the bells I know.

Like strangers' voices here they sound,

In lands where not a memory strays,

Nor landmark breathes of other days,

But all is new unhallow'd ground.

It is the third Christmas since Hallam’s death, and the bells of the poet’s new home are unfamiliar to him. They sound like strangers’ voices in this new land “where not a memory strays.”

,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,

**CVI**

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,

The flying cloud, the frosty light:

The year is dying in the night;

Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

Ring out the old, ring in the new,

Ring, happy bells, across the snow:

The year is going, let him go;

Ring out the false, ring in the true.

Ring out the grief that saps the mind,

For those that here we see no more;

Ring out the feud of rich and poor,

Ring in redress to all mankind.

Ring out a slowly dying cause,

And ancient forms of party strife;

Ring in the nobler modes of life,

With sweeter manners, purer laws.

Ring out the want, the care, the sin,

The faithless coldness of the times;

Ring out, ring out my mournful rhymes,

But ring the fuller minstrel in.

Ring out false pride in place and blood,

The civic slander and the spite;

Ring in the love of truth and right,

Ring in the common love of good.

Ring out old shapes of foul disease;

Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;

Ring out the thousand wars of old,

Ring in the thousand years of peace.

Ring in the valiant man and free,

The larger heart, the kindlier hand;

Ring out the darkness of the land,

Ring in the Christ that is to be.

In this wildly optimistic and hopeful poem, the poet addresses the bells tolling the New Year. He calls for them to “ring in the true,” the “nobler modes of life,” the “love of truth and right,” the “thousand years of peace” and “the Christ that is to be” while ringing out the false, strife, coldness, sadness, and wars.

,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,

**Epilogue**

O true and tried, so well and long,

Demand not thou a marriage lay;

In that it is thy marriage day

Is music more than any song.

Nor have I felt so much of bliss

Since first he told me that he loved

A daughter of our house; nor proved

Since that dark day a day like this;

Tho’ I since then have number’d o’er

Some thrice three years: they went and came,

Remade the blood and changed the frame,

And yet is love not less, but more;

No longer caring to embalm

In dying songs a dead regret,

But like a statue solid-set,

And moulded in colossal calm.

Regret is dead, but love is more

Than in the summers that are flown,

For I myself with these have grown

To something greater than before;

Which makes appear the songs I made

As echoes out of weaker times,

As half but idle brawling rhymes,

The sport of random sun and shade.

Although written later than advertised, the poem is written as if the poet writes on the day of his sister Cecilia’s wedding to Edmund Lushington. He remembers that Hallam loved one of his sisters, too, and foretold how lovely Cecilia would be. He gives an account of the wedding day and then retires. The moon is bright and silver. The poet reflects on the ability of men to achieve a higher state and for their race to progress. He thinks of Hallam, “a noble type” who now “lives in God.”

,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,

**Form**

“In Memoriam” consists of 131 smaller poems of varying length. Each short poem is comprised of isometric stanzas. The stanzas are iambic tetrameter quatrains with the rhyme scheme ABBA, a form that has since become known as the “In Memoriam Stanza.” (Of course, Tennyson did not invent the form—it appears in earlier works such as Shakespeare’s “The Phoenix and the Turtle”—but he did produce an enduring and memorable example of it.) With the ABBA rhyme scheme, the poem resolves itself in each quatrain; it cannot propel itself forward: each stanza seems complete, closed. Thus to move from one stanza to the next is a motion that does not come automatically to us by virtue of the rhyme scheme; rather, we must will it ourselves; this force of will symbolizes the poet’s difficulty in moving on after the loss of his beloved friend Arthur Henry Hallam.

,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,

**Commentary**

Tennyson wrote “In Memoriam” after he learned that his beloved friend Arthur Henry Hallam had died suddenly and unexpectedly of a fever at the age of 22. Hallam was not only the poet’s closest friend and confidante, but also the fiance of his sister. After learning of Hallam’s death, Tennyson was overwhelmed with doubts about the meaning of life and the significance of man’s existence. He composed the short poems that comprise “In Memoriam” over the course of seventeen years (1833-1849) with no intention of weaving them together, though he ultimately published them as a single lengthy poem in 1850.

T.S. Eliot called this poem “the most unapproachable of all his [Tennyson’s] poems,” and indeed, the sheer length of this work encumbers one’s ability to read and study it. Moreover, the poem contains no single unifying theme, and its ideas do not unfold in any particular order. It is loosely organized around three Christmas sections (28, 78, and 104), each of which marks another year that the poet must endure after the loss of Hallam. The climax of the poem is generally considered to be Section 95, which is based on a mystical trance Tennyson had in which he communed with the dead spirit of Hallam late at night on the lawn at his home at Somersby.

“In Memoriam” was intended as an elegy, or a poem in memory and praise of one who has died. As such, it contains all of the elements of a traditional pastoral elegy such as Milton’s “Lycidas,” including ceremonial mourning for the dead, praise of his virtues, and consolation for his loss. Moreover, all statements by the speaker can be understood as personal statements by the poet himself. Like most elegies, the “In Memoriam” poem begins with expressions of sorrow and grief, followed by the poet’s recollection of a happy past spent with the individual he is now mourning. These fond recollections lead the poet to question the powers in the universe that could allow a good person to die, which gives way to more general reflections on the meaning of life. Eventually, the poet’s attitude shifts from grief to resignation. Finally, in the climax, he realizes that his friend is not lost forever but survives in another, higher form. The poem closes with a celebration of this transcendent survival.

“In Memoriam” ends with a an epithalamion, or wedding poem, celebrating the marriage of Tennyson’s sister Cecilia to Edmund Lushington in 1842. The poet suggests that their marriage will lead to the birth of a child who will serve as a closer link between Tennyson’s generation and the “crowning race.” This birth also represents new life after the death of Hallam, and hints at a greater, cosmic purpose, which Tennyson vaguely describes as “One far-off divine event / To which the whole creation moves.”

Not just an elegy and an epithalamion, the poem is also a deeply philosophical reflection on religion, science, and the promise of immortality. Tennyson was deeply troubled by the proliferation of scientific knowledge about the origins of life and human progress: while he was writing this poem, Sir Charles Lyell published his Principles of Geology, which undermined the biblical creation story, and Robert Chambers published his early evolutionary tract, Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation. In “In Memoriam,” Tennyson insisted that we hold fast to our faith in a higher power in spite of our inability to prove God’s existence: “Believing where we cannot prove.” He reflects early evolutionary theories in his faith that man, through a process lasting millions of years, is developing into something greater. In the end, Tennyson replaces the doctrine of the immortality of the soul with the immortality of mankind through evolution, thereby achieving a synthesis between his profound religious faith and the new scientific ideas of his day.

,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,