

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

1. BIOGRAPHY

- a. **Tennyson hated biographers and feared that after his death they would go through his things and ferret out anything unusual or shameful.** George Eliot shared his distaste of biography; she complained "Is it not odious that as soon as a man is dead his desk is raked, and every insignificant memorandum which he never meant for the public is printed for the gossiping amusement of people too idle to reread his books? . . . There is a certain set [of people] who are titillated by the worst and indifferent to the best. I think this fashion is a disgrace to us all. It is something like the uncovering of the dead Byron's club-foot."
- b. **This trend of biography-phobia continues and intensifies into the 20th century, when writers like T.S. Eliot write special clauses in their wills forbidding biographies.** Nabokov calling biography "psycho-plagiarism," and the increasing amounts of records left about people make it easier and easier for us to invade a writer's privacy after he or she is dead - to ask questions and make suppositions we never would have thought acceptable during that person's life.
- c. **There was nothing "that embarrassing" in Tennyson's background, except that perhaps his family was a little feudal in their orientation, melancholy and obsessive in their personalities.** His adult family life was pleasant: he had two fine sons, Hallam and Lionel, a loving wife, Emily Sellwood, and an extended family of brothers and sisters who were devoted to him. However, it took Tennyson a long time to get this together; he suffered intensely during the early part of his life because his poetry was ripped apart by the critics, and he couldn't make enough money to marry by writing poetry, so had to postpone marriage until he became Poet Laureate in 1850 (succeeding Wordsworth). On the other hand, his early family life and childhood had been marred by family strife. One brother was an opium addict; one quarreled violently with their father, George Tennyson; one was put in an insane asylum. There was much brooding over ancestral inheritances, a theme that turns up in Tennyson's poetry.
- d. **Family tragedy:** George Tennyson, the eldest son, had expected to inherit his family estates, but was disinherited in favor of a younger brother. Forced to pursue a career as a clergyman (one of the few career options open to upper-middle-class males), he eventually became an alcoholic.

2. EARLY CAREER AND WORKS

- a. **Tennyson started writing poetry when he was still at home,** writing imitations of previous poets, and joined the "Apostles" at Cambridge. There he became friends with other poets, but most notably with Arthur Hallam, whose premature death was to inspire Tennyson to write "In Memoriam," arguably his best and certainly his longest poem.
- b. **Tennyson's Cambridge career was broken off** because of family troubles and lack of money, and he returned home, where he continued to write poetry. As your Norton notes, he was not "born" with a good ear for poetry; he developed it, slowly and painfully, in response to hostile criticism. He is an emblem among Victorian writers of hard work and craftsmanship as well as of genius.
- c. **After the enthusiastic reception of *In Memoriam* in 1850, Tennyson enjoyed extreme popularity during his lifetime** Like Dickens, Tennyson had an

immense and vocal public behind everything he did, and he earned enough money to live comfortably. This enthusiasm nevertheless faded drastically at the beginning of the 20th century, when he was denigrated by the Edwardians and Georgians, who were busy killing off their Victorian predecessors. Now his reputation has been much restored.

3. TENNYSON'S UNIQUENESS AMONG VICTORIAN POETS

- a. **Tennyson exists, as Matthew Arnold describes the wanderer in "Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse, in Victorian limbo: stuck in the difficult transition from the Enlightenment to Modernism. "Wandering between two worlds, one dead/The other powerless to be born/With nowhere yet to rest my head. . ."**
- b. **The pull of the past - nostalgia for Britain's imagined and romantic ancestry, epitomized in the poems in "Idylls of the King" - combined with the pull of the future, notable in such poems as "Locksley Hall: Sixty Years After" and "The Kraken." While part of Tennyson wants to be a theologian/philosopher - the part that wrote *In Mem* - the other part is a country bumpkin, slow, sensual, and caught up in the things of the earth. The two impulses sometimes make for a weird mix of weightiness and shallowness.**

What about the times in people's lives when things don't work out, when people are at rest, or when nothing in particular is happening? Tennyson, in several major poems, examines the imaginations of three people stuck at home, thinking about what they would like to be doing, but doing something else.

4. THE TENNYSONIAN HERO

- a. **Tennyson's poetry obsessively invokes heroes and characters from earlier folk traditions and works of literature such as the *Odyssey* and Arthurian romance. These heroes and heroines would have been familiar to Tennyson's Victorian readers, representing a glorious past in which great deeds were still possible.**
- b. **However, he pictures heroes and heroines in stasis: stuck, immobilized, unable to enact the heroic deeds for which they have become famous.**
- c. **The idea of the hero has changed through human and literary history (Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 1957):**
 - i. **in early works, heroes were superhuman, godlike (Zeus, Perseus, Athena, Apollo)**
 - ii. **later, they were semi-deities: often half-god, half human (Perseus, Medusa, etc.)**
 - iii. **in Shakespeare's time, they become flawed, "tragic" heroes: people with good qualities who also have serious problems, "more sinned against than sinning"; Hamlet, King Lear, Faust)**
 - iv. **in modern and postmodern times, heroes have become even more problematic: often people who are more seriously flawed than heroic (Willie Loman in *Death of a Salesman*; Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*)**
- d. **Tennyson's heroes are in transition between two of these stages: they are semi-godlike, but also fallen because of a world that is decaying, in transition. They are unable to move forward, but still obsessed (like Tennyson) with the possibilities that they are unable to realize.**

MARIANA

In "Mariana" T enlists image of the immured maiden, who finds herself in the "closed situation" of the moated grange, an image we will also see in "The Lady of Shalott." Though T is saying different things in these poems, the similarities suggest that he found the symbol of the abandoned, dying maiden stood for something important in his imagination.

The aperture - the hole or window through which she looks out on the world - lets her see a distant city, Troy or Camelot, into which her lover has recently vanished.

As her thoughts follow him across the glooming flats, or down the river, or through the gorge, she moans, and her song, "overflowing the vale profound," is ultimately carried to the city, where it is either not heard, or heard too late.

What is the point of this image of the woman, who has lived a non-life, mourning the romance that will never happen? What other experiences does this illuminate?

The poem seems narrated by Mariana because it's told her from point of view. Images of brokenness and decay, drabness and shadow, emptiness and desolation symbolize her mind. S1: The flower pots crusted with moss; rusty nails; broken sheds; unlifted latch; weedy thatch.

But is she speaking?

Prolonged sense of interior time. Waiting in anxiety or dread for something that may never happen. Strain, immobility, and frustration. (Read S2.)

Alternation of scenes of night and day gives sense of time passing without much of anything happening; these are not specific days, but all days are identical to one another. Image of dust-mote at end; that particular hour in the afternoon, time and again, is the most difficult for her.

Verbs in the habitual mode (things she does repetitively)

Retardation of the meter, proliferation of end-stopped lines.

Incremental repetition/variations in the refrain, which emphasize the sameness of everything.

Absence in the poem of any generalizing or controlling intelligence: the whole thing is fragmented, isolated details. Realizing the state of consciousness through details - anticipating the preRaphaelites.

You may want to compare this poem to "Mariana in the South," which is deliberately its opposite in every way.

THE LADY OF SHALOTT

A version of an old British fairy tale in which a fairy falls in love with a mortal and, in claiming him for her own, dies.

Also a retelling of Arthurian legend; reliance of Britons on idea of the "once and future

king," kingdom brought down by the folly of one woman; see Bulfinch 441 for more information, if you're interested. The Arthurian legends in Idylls of the King continue this tradition. Tennyson's nostalgia; wearing "poet clothes" to have his picture taken; dressing the sons up as medieval boys; photos taken by Julia Margaret Cameron to illustrate the volume these poems were published in.

Incremental repetition in refrain line, subtle alliteration (S1), onomatopoeia (S2) help create trance-like affect, where we, like the Lady of Shalott, feel what it's like to be suspended in time, able to peer through a small window at the world of consciousness.

This poem, like "Mariana," is told from the POV of the Lady, who sees everything as a work of art; check out the description of Lancelot at the top of 1102. He's a work of art holding up a work of art. Why does he sing "Tirra Lirra" (bottom of 1102)? What are we supposed to make of this little nonsense verse? Is it a trance? Or just dumb?

She is a weaver who must not look out her window, except through a mirror - the paradigm of the artist, who in Aristotle's term must "hold the mirror up to nature." Looking at reality is too much for her; therefore she must stay in the shadowy realm of things reflected. The images of sunlight in this poem, like the "glittering bridle," the "brazen greaves," the "helmet and the burning feather" suggest a shine so bright that it blinds the seer.

When she has real experience - when she connects herself not only to art, but to someone in the world - she dies of unsatisfied longing.

Does this poem romanticize dying of unrequited love, or does it protest having to have commerce with the world when you're better off as an artist in your ivory tower? Last S in part 3: the destruction of her universe.

What do you make of what Lancelot says of her in the last S: what are we supposed to make of his epitaph? Is it accurate? Did he understand her? How culpable is he for making her die?

ULYSSES

De-romanticizing the epic hero. (Read first S aloud.) Frye on high mimetic and low mimetic heroes; Tennyson is taking the high mimetic hero and making him one of us.

Why is this poem stichic instead of strophic? (Because it is conversational; because it mimics the stichic form of epics; because it is prosaic, not exciting and "heroic". . .)

Why do you think the scenario of Ulysses at this point in his life appealed to Tennyson? (Because no one had ever written about it before? The sense among poets that everything good has already been written about; that one's predecessors have made all the points?)

. . . all experience is an arch wherethrough 18
Gleams that untraveled world whose margin fades
Forever and forever when I move,
How dull it is to pause, to make an end
To rust unburnished, not to shine in use! 23

Can a person live on memories? Is the celebrated "trip down memory lane" enough; is it necessary to keep living at one's old rate? A kind of mourning for retirement; seeing all one's allies growing old with oneself.

**My mariners,
Souls that have toiled, and wrought, and thought with me -
That ever with a frolic welcome took
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
Free hearts, free foreheads - you and I are old;
Old age heath yet his honor and his toil
Death closes all; but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.**

(top of 1110; l. 47)

caesura

double negative

Since this is a poem about the closing days of someone's life, we expect its closure to have particularly strong meaning. What do you make of the ending of this poem? (Is it strong enough? Is it too much of a compromise? Is it an old man dreaming of old days? What does it have to do with the rest of the poem?)

**Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are -
One equal temper of heroic hearts
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.**