

Tennyson as a Poet

More than any other Victorian-era writer, Tennyson has seemed the embodiment of his age, both to his contemporaries and to modern readers. In his own day he was said to be—with Queen Victoria and Prime Minister William Gladstone—one of the three most famous living persons, a reputation no other poet writing in English has ever had.

Alfred Tennyson was a British poet. He was the Poet Laureate of Great Britain and Ireland during much of Queen Victoria's reign and remains one of the most popular British poets. In 1829, Tennyson was awarded the Chancellor's Gold Medal at Cambridge for one of his first pieces, "Timbuktu." He published his first solo collection of poems, *Poems Chiefly Lyrical* in 1830. "Claribel" and "Mariana", which remain some of Tennyson's most celebrated poems, were included in this volume. Although decried by some critics as overly sentimental, his verse soon proved popular and brought Tennyson to the attention of well-known writers of the day, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Tennyson's early poetry, with its medievalism and powerful visual imagery, was a major influence on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

Tennyson also excelled at penning short lyrics, such as "Break, Break, Break", "The Charge of the Light Brigade", "Tears, Idle Tears", and "Crossing the Bar". Much of his verse was based on classical mythological themes, such as "Ulysses", although "In Memoriam A.H.H." was written to commemorate his friend Arthur Hallam, a fellow poet and student at Trinity College, Cambridge, after he died of a stroke at the age of 22.[3] Tennyson also wrote some notable blank verse including *Idylls of the King*, "Ulysses", and "Tithonus". During his career, Tennyson attempted drama, but his plays enjoyed little success.

A number of phrases from Tennyson's work have become commonplaces of the English language, including "Nature, red in tooth and claw" (*In Memoriam A.H.H.*), "'Tis better to have loved and lost / Than never to have loved at all", "Theirs not to reason why, / Theirs but to do and die", "My strength is as the strength of ten, / Because my heart is pure", "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield", "Knowledge comes, but Wisdom lingers", and "The old order changeth, yielding place to new". He is the ninth most frequently quoted writer in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*.

As source material for his poetry, Tennyson used a wide range of subject matter ranging from medieval legends to classical myths and from domestic situations to observations of nature. The influence of John Keats and other Romantic poets published before and during his childhood is evident from the richness of his imagery and descriptive writing. He also handled rhythm masterfully. The insistent beat of *Break, Break, Break* emphasises the relentless sadness of the subject matter. Tennyson's use of the musical qualities of words to emphasise his rhythms and meanings is sensitive. The language of "I come from haunts of coot and hern" lilts and ripples like the brook in the poem and the last two lines of "Come down O maid from yonder mountain height" illustrate his telling combination of onomatopoeia, alliteration, and assonance:

The moan of doves in immemorial elms

And murmuring of innumerable bees.

Tennyson was a craftsman who polished and revised his manuscripts extensively, to the point where his efforts at self-editing were described by his contemporary Robert Browning as "insane", symptomatic of "mental infirmity". His complex compositional practice and frequent redrafting also demonstrates a dynamic relationship between images and text, as can be seen in the many notebooks he worked in. Few poets have used such a variety of styles with such an exact understanding of metre; like many Victorian poets, he experimented in adapting the quantitative metres of Greek and Latin poetry to English. He reflects the Victorian period of his maturity in his feeling for order and his tendency towards moralising. He also reflects a concern common among Victorian writers in being troubled by the conflict between religious faith and expanding scientific knowledge. Tennyson possessed a strong poetic power, which his early readers often attributed to his "Englishness" and his masculinity.

Well known among his longer works are *Maud* and *Idylls of the King*, the latter arguably the most famous Victorian adaptation of the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. A common thread of grief, melancholy, and loss connects much of his poetry (including *Mariana*, *The Lotos Eaters*, *Tears*, *Idle Tears*, *In Memoriam*), possibly reflecting Tennyson's own lifelong struggle with debilitating depression. T. S. Eliot famously described Tennyson as "the saddest of all English poets", whose technical mastery of verse and language provided a "surface" to his poetry's "depths, to the abyss of sorrow". Other poets such as W. H. Auden maintained a more critical stance, stating that Tennyson was the "stupidest" of all the English poets, adding that: "There was little about melancholia he didn't know; there was little else that he did."