

Tears, Idle Tears by Tennyson

“Tears, Idle Tears” was published in 1847, in a volume of poetry titled *The Princess*. After years of struggling with poverty, Alfred, Lord Tennyson was awarded a government pension in 1845, which allowed him to apply himself to longer works. *The Princess* was intended to be a long examination of a contemporary controversy, the education of women and the establishment of female colleges. The focus of *The Princess* shifted, though, while Tennyson was writing it, and it ended up giving more consideration to the roles of men and women in society, which the poet considered to be moving unnaturally toward each other. *The Princess* achieved popularity—when the first edition sold out, new editions appeared, year after year, for decades following—but critics considered it a failure of Tennyson’s imagination, a sign of his inability to maintain a subject throughout an extended work. The same critics, though, did praise specific poems that had appeared as part of the larger work, in particular “Tears, Idle Tears.”

The speaker sings of the baseless and inexplicable tears that rise in his heart and pour forth from his eyes when he looks out on the fields in autumn and thinks of the past.

This past, (“the days that are no more”) is described as fresh and strange. It is as fresh as the first beam of sunlight that sparkles on the sail of a boat bringing the dead back from the underworld, and it is sad as the last red beam of sunlight that shines on a boat that carries the dead down to this underworld.

The speaker then refers to the past as not “fresh,” but “sad” and strange. As such, it resembles the song of the birds on early summer mornings as it sounds to a dead person, who lies watching the “glimmering square” of sunlight as it appears through a square window.

In the final stanza, the speaker declares the past to be dear, sweet, deep, and wild. It is as dear as the memory of the kisses of one who is now dead, and it is as sweet as those kisses that we imagine ourselves bestowing on lovers who actually have loyalties to others. So, too, is the past as deep as “first love” and as wild as the regret that usually follows this experience. The speaker concludes that the past is a “Death in Life.”

This poem is written in blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter. It consists of four five-line stanzas, each of which closes with the words “the days that are no more.”

“Tears, Idle Tears” is part of a larger poem called “*The Princess*,” published in 1847. Tennyson wrote “*The Princess*” to discuss the relationship between the sexes and to provide an argument for women’s rights in higher education. However, the work as a whole does not present a single argument or tell a coherent story. Rather, like so much of Tennyson’s poetry, it evokes complex emotions and moods through a mastery of language. “Tears, Idle Tears,” a particularly evocative section, is one of several interludes of song in the midst of the poem.