

David Lattanzi

Emily Baldys

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Victorian Literature

Analysis of In Memoriam

During the Victorian Era, change was happening throughout many different mediums in England. Women were finally given the right to vote, British Colonialism was at the start of its decline, the industrialization of the era was ushering in new jobs (as well as poor living conditions), and people were starting to question their connection to God. This connection to God, or lack thereof, is very important because religion had been deep-rooted in many European cultures for centuries. Life in the Victorian Era was a period of great change, and Alfred Tennyson's *In Memoriam* questions the existence of God at a time when scientific knowledge was becoming ever increasing and the connection to God ever decreasing. This paper discusses how Tennyson shows how society's connection to God changes and why the text is important to the Victorian Era and to today.

Alfred Tennyson's *In Memoriam* was written out of grief for losing his beloved friend Arthur Hallam. Hallam and Tennyson were very close and to cope with the grief of losing his friend, Tennyson wrote the poem that we know today. The poem is not only just about Tennyson's grief over Hallam, however. It is also about society's fears about whether God is real or not because of the advent of the scientific revolution happening throughout the 19th century. Something to be considered about the decline of religion in the Victorian Era is how industrialization was becoming more and more of a prevalent presence. It ushered in new technologies and jobs, yet it also brought pollution and poor quality of life for workers: "The

skyline is dominated by industrial chimneys spewing smoke, replacing the [church] spires” (Masterman 22). As living conditions declined, people’s frustrations with God increased. How could God allow for the lower classes suffering?

In the very beginning of the poem, we see how Tennyson questions the existence of God. Reading the first stanza, it says, “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” (Tennyson 31). From that first stanza in Tennyson’s poem, we can see how he is doubtful of God. Everybody puts their faith into God, yet nobody can say for sure if he is real as nobody has actually seen God’s face. Society puts so much faith into God and looks for his love and through this first stanza Tennyson is highlighting this idea.

Tennyson highlights the skepticism of religion at the time through that first stanza, and he continues to do so throughout the poem. Another very important line from Tennyson’s poem is “Nature, red in tooth and claw” (Tennyson). What this line is effectively saying is how mankind was no different than animals with how cruel we can be to each other. This is evident through how poorly people were treated through industrialization in the Victorian Era. Living conditions were extremely low and many English people were exploited to the benefit of the rich. This line shows a lack of religious morality as people were increasingly cruel to each other and selfish gain was rampant, which goes against what religion teaches you. Although religion tells people not to be materialistic or harm others, the reality was that this happened every day in the Victorian Era. This line from the poem later became very famous amongst Darwinists and shaped people’s thoughts on nature and science. “Tennyson’s description of nature ‘red in tooth and claw’ and marked by almost incredible waste, careless not of the individual but of the type” (Woodhouse 209). This important line from Tennyson’s poem is talking about how God created

life out of love, yet nature is violent, and everybody dies. Tennyson's 'red in tooth and claw' is in support of that idea. Nature is harsh and brutal, and people could see that every day in the Victorian Era due to their poor living conditions.

Something that is interesting in Tennyson's poem is his questions about the afterlife. An important question from the poem is if Hallam is waiting in Heaven, won't their friendship grow apart while Tennyson is still on Earth and alive? An explanation to this thought says, "The basis of his faith arises out of the purpose of life which is to establish an individual consciousness or identity. Surely, then, the dead must retain some memory of their earthly life; otherwise, man would have turned himself anew after death, thus rendering the purpose of living a mere waste of blood and breath" (Steward, Shimreingam). The quote is explaining Tennyson's thoughts on the afterlife. Tennyson's new idea of faith was that people were put on Earth to develop their own personalities and traits that make up who a person is. When a person does eventually die, they take those lived experiences with them to the afterlife. This contrasts with the beginning where Tennyson is upset over the death of Hallam and how his soul may be gone forever. But the poem is still saying that if there was an afterlife, then Hallam may be living in heaven without Tennyson and may soon forget about him. Hallam might not be as he remembers him and because of this, Tennyson could be saying that his belief doesn't matter as his friend would be gone whether or not Tennyson reunites with him in an afterlife. Through this idea we can see how Tennyson could be saying that belief of God doesn't matter as we wouldn't be able to reunite with our loved ones as they would be different than how we knew them before death.

At the beginning, Tennyson is questioning the existence of God, yet as the poem continues, we see him make claims and theories about why we people are born and why there is suffering. Perhaps Tennyson is trying to reconcile with himself the purpose of if God was real,

why would he put us on Earth to suffer. This fits into the thoughts of the people in poor living conditions and how they are being made to suffer under the Industrial Revolution and heavy pollution with no end in sight.

Tennyson shifts from doubt of God at the beginning of the poem to being in support of God and saying that maybe he is in fact real. This shift could also be a representation of the thoughts of society during the nineteenth century. Many were doubting the existence of God, but many were too scared to not believe in him. A quote from the beginning of *In Memoriam* supports this, “We are fools and slight; we mock thee when we do not fear” (Tennyson). This is saying that people mock those who are not believers. This shows how society pushes people to support religion during the time even if they might not believe in God. A written study of the text by John F Genung states that “*In Memoriam* in 1850, during which, while the age was becoming aware of its deepest spiritual problems, the poem also was progressing point by point towards completion” (Genung 13). What the quote by Tennyson could also be saying is that people who don’t fear God and aren’t religious are mocking those who are religious. This line from the poem could be interpreted in both ways, which is important to understanding Tennyson’s (as well as Victorian England’s) grapple with himself over his ideas about whether or not God exists.

Tennyson never makes definitive claims about whether God is real or not but I think that is also a product of the time that the poem was written. Tennyson is voicing the concerns and fears of doubt about the afterlife and not answering the question of religion in its entirety. That can be good as it allows for people to make up their own minds about the topic itself. It can be a token of comfort to those struggling with their faith to read something that helps to bring them closer to God, and it can be used to have a disconnect with God. Tennyson is not arguing too strongly on either side about whether or not God is real.

John F. Genung also states that, "... it makes no parade of claims. Ostensibly and really it is a series of meditations on love and death and immortality; meditations apparently compelled and controlled by the poets personal bereavement, with the long experience of pain that succeeds" (Genung 29). Tennyson is writing his poem to reconcile his thoughts on death. Alan Sinfield writes, "*In Memoriam* illustrates the twin attitudes behind the poem. The first suggests that a work of art is an artifact . . . The second shows the poet as writing because he cannot help himself" (Sinfield 17). This shows that Tennyson is using art and poetry to memorialize his friend (as the name of the poem suggests), but also because the act of writing the poem is therapeutic and is a coping mechanism for Tennyson.

In Memoriam is not just a poem arguing for or against religion. It highlights the growing concerns of society about the existence of God and the afterlife. Like stated earlier, Tennyson starts out as being in doubt of God and his existence which causes him to be depressed about the death of Hallam. But later in the text we see that Tennyson is no longer in doubt of God and is instead happy that he might someday be able to visit his friend in heaven once again. The switch between both ideas shows how society itself flip-flops between both of these ideas.

Tennyson could just be saying that religion is just a way for people to reconcile themselves with death, whether that be the death of friends or family, or a person's own fear of dying. A quote from Karl Marx says, "Religion is the opium of the people". This quote from Marx can be interpreted as being that people will use religion to numb themselves from the pains and harsh realities of the natural world. While God may have allowed for people to suffer to help shape people's individual identities, he may also be a creation of people's minds to help explain and get through the natural hardships of a human life.

People today are still questioning the existence of God. Religion is something that has been decreasing within society rapidly over the past century. A poll by PRRI, a non-partisan and independent research organization states that the percentage of those who are “religiously unaffiliated” has grown from sixteen percent to almost twenty-seven percent between 2006 and 2022 (PRRI). While many people are still followers and believers of their respective religions, science is becoming more of a tactile belief for people. But science doesn’t provide solace to people over fears of death. Religion allows people to find comfort in death, knowing that they’ll be able to live with their loved ones once again in the afterlife. This is highlighted in *In Memoriam* when Tennyson says that he’ll be happy that he’ll be able to live with his beloved friend once again.

Tennyson’s questioning of God isn’t the only piece of media to do so. There are many pieces of media that creatively question this through different mediums. We can still see that today as a rapper named, IDK, wrote a concept album called “*Is He Real?*” which questions his own self-doubt over his faith. People create media debating whether or not God is real because it’s a topic that will never die out. People will always be afraid of death and if Christianity were to ever die people would most likely create new religions to reconcile the idea of death. Nobody wants to die but going through life with the knowledge that you can die shows people what living is. The fear of nothingness after death gives people a reason to turn to religion, as it gives people comfort during life as it lets people live without the constant fear of death looming over them. Religion is what provides that comfort.

In Memoriam tells readers that it’s ok to have doubt in God as there really is no way to prove his existence. It says that whether or not God exists, it is good to have your own faith with your own degree of self-doubt. Rather than being depressed by grief of the death of loved ones,

people should celebrate the life and memory of the person. Whether or not you believe in God does not matter in this aspect as it should be a celebration of life and not death.

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