

## Chapter 11

# Alfred Tennyson

### Life and Works



Alfred Tennyson (1809–1892) was born at Somersby Rectory, Lincolnshire. His father was a vicar of the Church of England, holding several livings by gift from landed proprietors. So Tennyson was from birth in close connection with the main conservative interests of England. In 1830, when he was still an undergraduate at Cambridge, he published his first volume of poems. Two years later he published a second volume, showing a control of both medieval and classical stories in such poems as “The Lady of Shalott” and “The Lotos-Eaters” and in certain others such as “The Palace of Art”, giving indication of his ambition to be not a singer merely, but also a teacher. In “The Miller’s Daughter” and “The May Queen”, he began his long series of idylls of English life, short narratives richly pictured and melodiously tuned, with which he was destined to win the public all the more easily perhaps because of their touches of sentimentality and unreality.

In 1836 Tennyson went to live near London, where he came into contact with Carlyle, and was stirred by his spirit of social protest. He also found in the latter’s spiritual view of the universe a support for his religious faith, which was to be sorely tried by doubt. For ten years he published nothing but brooded and worked away in his London lodgings until, in 1842, he came forth with two volumes which took the critics and the world by storm. In these two volumes the range and variety of work was remarkable. Almost every province of poetry was touched upon, from the lyric simplicity of “Break, Break, Break” to the largely moulded epic narrative “Morte d’Arthur”. In one of these poems, “Locksley Hall”, he uttered the protest which young men like himself, of good though not noble birth, were feeling in the presence of class distinctions which subordinated love to rank, and of an industrial civilisation which made gold the supreme test of success.

Five years later, in 1847, his long poem *The Princess* came out. It was Tennyson’s contribution to the question, then beginning to be widely discussed, of the higher education of women. The subtitle is *A Medley*, and no description could be more just.



In 1850 he published *In Memoriam*, which was written in memory of Arthur Hallam, a beloved friend and college-mate of Tennyson's, who had died in 1833. The poem is often considered Tennyson's greatest poetic achievement. It is a stunning and profoundly moving long poem consisting of a prologue, 131 cantos/stanzas, and an epilogue. However, there is no single unified theme in this elegy. Grief, loss and renewal of faith, survival and other themes compete with one another.

### Brief Comment

In 1850 Tennyson became the poet-laureate. A government pension enabled him to marry and to settle in the Isle of Wight. From this time until his death in 1892, he stood as the spokesman of his people in times of national sorrow or rejoicing. In such poems as "The Charge of the Light Brigade" "The Revenge" and "Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington", he ministered to national pride, stoked the fires of imperialism, and brought poetry nearer to the national life than it had been since Shakespeare. In the *Idylls of the King* he painted the character of the first English national hero, King Arthur, and gave a new meaning to the legends which had grown up in the Middle Ages about the knights of the Round Table. In no way did he illustrate more conspicuously his tendency to forsake pure romance for romantic treatment of present realities. In these poems, which are full of suggestions of modern moral and social problems, King Arthur's attempt to bring civilisation to his realm through the devotion of his knights failed because of sins which Tennyson felt to be the peculiar danger of his own age.

Tennyson's later works consisted largely of the series of dramas, for the most part based on English history, *Queen Mary*, *Harold* and *Becket*. He was not highly successful in mastering the dramatic form, but his example recalled the former greatness and dignity of the drama and gave an early sign of its recovery. In a number of poems he recalled his old manner—in the classic beauty of "Demeter" and "The Death of Oenone"; in the allegory of noble striving towards the light in "Merlin and the Gleam". "Crossing the Bar" may be taken as his farewell word spoken with solemn gladness as he put off into the mysterious sea of death.

Tennyson's use of dramatic dialogue is worth noticing. He and Browning brought this form to an independent type, though it was already used by Renaissance poets such as John Donne and others.

### Selections

#### Break, Break, Break

Break, break, break,  
On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!  
And I would<sup>1</sup> that my tongue could utter

The thoughts that arise in me.

O, well for the fisherman's boy, 5  
 That he shouts with his sister at play!  
 O, well for the sailor lad,  
 That he sings in his boat on the bay!

And the stately ships go on 10  
 To their haven under the hill;  
 But O for the touch of a vanished hand<sup>2</sup>,  
 And the sound of a voice that is still<sup>3</sup>!

Break, break, break,  
 At the foot of thy crags, O Sea!  
 But the tender grace of a day that is dead 15  
 Will never come back to me.

### Notes

1. I would: I wish
2. a vanished hand: the hand of the poet's dead friend Arthur Hallam
3. a voice that is still: the voice of Arthur Hallam

### For Study and Discussion

1. Why does the speaker tell the sea to break on the cold gray stones? Why does he stress that the stones are cold and gray? What impression does the first line leave on you?
2. What scene does the second stanza create? Why does the speaker wish to be the fisherman's boy or the sailor lad?
3. What is the difference between a ship and a still voice?
4. What is the tone of this poem?
5. Learn the first two stanzas by heart.

### The Eagle<sup>1</sup>

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;  
 Close to the sun in lonely lands,  
 Ringed with the azure world, he stands.



The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;  
 He watches from his mountain walls,  
 And like a thunderbolt he falls. 5

### Note

1. This poem was written in 1851 in memory of Arthur Hallam, Tennyson's friend who had been engaged to his sister but died in 1833.

### For Study and Discussion

1. What is the rhyme scheme of this short poem? In the first line, alliteration is used. How does it contribute to the sound effect of this poem?
2. What does "lonely lands" refer to? Is he lonely in life? What is the significance of the words "close to the sun"?
3. How do you understand the image of the "wrinkled sea"? What is the significance of the sea crawling beneath him?
4. The eagle falls like a thunderbolt, presenting the sudden death of the poet's friend. One can sense that the poet compared his friend to the eagle. What is your understanding of this image?

### Crossing the Bar<sup>1</sup>

Sunset and evening star,  
 And one clear call for me!  
 And may there be no moaning of the bar,<sup>2</sup>  
 When I put out to sea,

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,  
 Too full for sound and foam, 5  
 When that which drew from out the boundless deep  
 Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,  
 And after that the dark! 10  
 And may there be no sadness of farewell,  
 When I embark;

For though from out our bourne<sup>3</sup> of Time and Place  
The flood may bear me far,  
I hope to see my Pilot face to face  
When I have crossed the bar. 15

### Notes

1. Although not the last poem written by Tennyson, “Crossing the Bar” appears, at his request, as the final poem in all collections of his work.
2. And may there be no moaning of the bar: Mournful sound of the ocean beating on a sand bar at the mouth of a harbour
3. bourne: boundary

### For Study and Discussion

1. What are the images of the sunset and evening star symbolic of? Why does the speaker feel they are calling for him?
2. The image of home seems to be crucial in the second stanza. Please talk about the significance of it. To the speaker, where is home?
3. What does the speaker mean by talking of embarking?
4. The word “bar” is a central one in this poem. “Crossing the bar” is certainly symbolic of something. Of what? Who will be the speaker’s pilot?
5. Learn the first and the third stanzas by heart.