Alfred, Lord Tennyson  
(1809–1892)
You may think of Tennyson—or any male Victorian poet—as a bearded old man whose picture belongs in a cracked, dusty book. Think again. Here is Thomas Carlyle’s description of the tall, handsome but moody young Tennyson: “One of the finest looking men in the world. A great shock of rough dusty-dark hair; bright-laughing hazel eyes . . . of sallow-brown complexion, almost Indian-looking.” This is the young man who was to become in middle age the most celebrated poet of Victorian England: Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

An Unhappy Childhood Tennyson was born in the rural town of Somersby in Lincolnshire, the fourth of twelve children. He was a sensitive boy who was charmed by the magical words “far, far away.” His father, a clergyman, had a large library and supervised Tennyson’s early education. He predicted that his son would be “the greatest Poet of the Time.” At the same time, he was extremely bitter, having been disinherited by his own father. His anger poisoned the atmosphere of the Tennyson household. As a teenager, Alfred was probably eager to escape to Cambridge University.

The Power of Friendship At first, Tennyson was disappointed by Cambridge. He wrote about his studies: “None but dry-headed, calculating, angular little gentlemen can take much delight in them.” Then, he met the young man who became his closest friend, Arthur Henry Hallam. They were often together, and Hallam intended to marry Tennyson’s sister Emily. In 1830, with Hallam’s encouragement, Tennyson published Poems, Chiefly Lyrical, which was followed two years later by a volume simply entitled Poems.

A Stunning Tragedy In 1833, however, Hallam died suddenly, leaving a void in Tennyson’s life that nearly destroyed him. The poet’s grief became the inspiration for some of his greatest work. Soon after Hallam’s death, Tennyson began working on a series of short poems that considered questions of death, religious faith, and immortality. This series, which grew over seventeen years into an extended elegy for his friend, was published in 1850 under the title In Memoriam, A.H.H.

National Honor The elegy so impressed Prince Albert that in 1850, he encouraged Queen Victoria to appoint Tennyson the poet laureate of England, replacing the recently deceased Wordsworth. For the next forty years, Tennyson published regularly. One of his most celebrated works, Idylls of the King, a series of poems based on the legend of King Arthur, began appearing in 1859.

In 1884, Queen Victoria made Tennyson a baron, and so added the title of Lord to his name. He was the first English writer to earn this title for his literary achievements. The honor befitted one whom most Victorians regarded as the poetic voice of their age.

Land, Literature, Long Life When royalties from In Memoriam, A.H.H. began to flow in, Tennyson bought a farm on the Isle of Wight. There, he and his wife Emily Sellwood raised two children. Tennyson continued to publish poems into his eighties. His poetry spoke directly to the Victorians, who found reflected in it their deepest faith and deepest doubts.

An Enduring Reputation Although early twentieth-century critics faulted Tennyson for intellectual shallowness, the value of his work endures. In clear, rich, hauntingly musical language, it expresses the aspirations that sustain the human spirit.
Preview

Connecting to the Literature
When everything is going wrong, you may turn to a friend and ask: Why? When Tennyson’s best friend, Arthur Hallam, died, Tennyson turned to his culture—its science, its poetry, its religion—and demanded: Tell me, why? In Memoriam is the result of his grief-stricken question.

Literary Analysis
The Speaker in Poetry
The speaker in a poem—the person who “says” its words—is not necessarily the poet. Speakers fall into the following categories:
- Fictional or real
- Generalized (not described in specific detail) or with a specific identity
Even if the speaker of a poem is fictional, he or she may resemble the poem’s actual author, sharing similar situations and experiences. As you read, determine the identity of each speaker and analyze the speaker’s conflict and motivation.

Comparing Literary Works
Tennyson’s speakers range from well-defined individuals to nonspecific narrators. Some of his speakers have histories—they have undergone a change or suffered a loss. Using such speakers as well as other characters, he dramatizes different experiences of time, including the following:
- A perpetual present, in which nothing significant changes
- A restless movement from past accomplishment into an unknown future
- The loss of the past
As you read, compare the views of time in each poem. Consider whether each poem creates its own “time”—a moment of reflection in which the speaker sums up the past, making way for the future.

Reading Strategy
Judging a Poet’s Message
One way to respond to a poem is to judge the poet’s message—to decide how true and useful that message is. As you read, use a chart like the one shown to determine what the poet is saying and to evaluate the message.

Vocabulary Builder

**diffusive** (dif’ yəsiv) adj. tending to spread out (p. 868)

**churls** (charlz) n. farm laborers; peasants (p. 871)

**waning** (wan’ ing) v. gradually becoming dimmer or weaker (p. 873)

**furrows** (fur’ oz) n. narrow grooves, such as those made by a plow (p. 878)

from In Memoriam, A.H.H. / The Lady of Shalott / from The Princess: Tears, Idle Tears / Ulysses ■ 865
Background In this poem, Tennyson extends the story of Ulysses (yoo lis' ez'), the hero of Homer's epic the Odyssey. Homer's writing ends after Ulysses' triumphant return home to Ithaca. Years later, Tennyson tells us, the hero has grown restless. Although he had been away for twenty long years—ten fighting in the Trojan War and another ten making the long and adventure-filled voyage back—Ulysses finds that he is contemplating yet another journey.

It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Matched with an aged wife, I mete and dole\(^1\)
Unequal\(^2\) laws unto a savage race.
5 That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.
I cannot rest from travel; I will drink
Life to the lees.\(^3\) All times I have enjoyed
Greatly, have suffered greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone; on shore, and when
10 Through scudding drifts the rainy Hyades\(^4\)
Vexed the dim sea. I am become a name;

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1. mete and dole measure and give out.
2. unequal unfair.
3. lees sediment.
4. Hyades (hi' e déz') group of stars whose rising was assumed to be followed by rain.

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876 ■ Progress and Decline (1833–1901)
For always roaming with a hungry heart
Much have I seen and known—cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments,
Myself not least, but honored of them all—
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.
I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough
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!
As though to breathe were life. Life piled on life
Were all too little, and of one to me
Little remains; but every hour is saved
From that eternal silence, something more,
A bringer of new things; and vile it were
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,
And this gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

This is my son, mine own Telemachus,
To whom I leave the scepter and the isle
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfill
This labor, by slow prudence to make mild
A rugged people, and through soft degrees
Subdue them to the useful and the good.
Most blameless is he, centered in the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to fail
In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet adoration to my household gods,
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.

There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail;
There gloom the dark broad seas. 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 hath 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.
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks;
The long day wanes; the slow moon climbs; the deep

5. isle Ithaca, an island off the coast of Greece.
6. meet appropriate.
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down;
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles, 7
And see the great Achilles, 8 whom we knew.
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.

7. Happy Isles — Elysium, or the Islands of the Blessed: in classical mythology, the place
   heroes went after death.
8. Achilles (ə kĭl' ēs) — Greek hero of the Trojan War.

Critical Reading

1. Respond: Which of these two poems seems to you to be more hopeful? Why?
2. (a) Recall: What three comparisons in "Tears, Idle Tears" describe
   "the days that are no more"? (b) Analyze: What contrast does each
   comparison involve? (c) Interpret: What feelings does the line "Deep
   as first love, and wild with all regret" capture?
3. (a) Recall: In "Ulysses," how does Ulysses describe his situation?
   (b) Compare and Contrast: How does this situation contrast with his
   previous experiences? (c) Draw Conclusions: What is Ulysses' attitude
   toward his experiences?
4. (a) Recall: According to lines 58–61, what is Ulysses' purpose?
   (b) Draw Conclusions: What are Ulysses' feelings about aging?
   (c) Draw Conclusions: What is his attitude toward life in general?
5. Speculate: What advice might Ulysses give the speaker in "Tears, Idle
   Tears"?
6. Generalize: Why is nostalgia—the intense presence of the past accom-
   panied by the equally intense sense that it is no more—such an
   attractive feeling to poets and their readers?
7. Apply: What type of organization might take the last line of "Ulysses"
   as its slogan? Explain.