



## **AGONY, RUMINATION AND DISBELIEF IN ALFRED TENNYSON'S IN MEMORIAM**

Khairul Hisyam Baharuddin\*<sup>1</sup>, Nazatul Syima Mohd Nasir<sup>2</sup>, Nor Hazwani Munirah Lateh<sup>3</sup>  
and Fairuz A'dilah Rusdi<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> English Department, Faculty of Languages and Human Development, Universiti Malaysia  
Kelantan, Bachok, Malaysia.

(E-mail: khairulhisyam@umk.edu.my, syima.mn@umk.edu.my)

<sup>3,4</sup> English Department, Faculty of Languages and Human Development, Universiti Malaysia  
Kelantan, Bachok, Malaysia.

(E-mail: hazwani.l@umk.edu.my, fairuz@umk.edu.my)

### **ABSTRACT**

Many mainstream mediums in Western popular culture continue to use the concept of phases of grief for dying patients and bereaved survivors. It may reflect a desire to understand how the mind comes to recognise events and circumstances in the interests of humanity, and it may not be irrational. Responses to the question of whether or not discernible patterns occur in psychological reactions to loss will expose normative bereavement responses and recognise mechanisms needed to promote positive loss adjustment (Prigerson & Maciejewski, 2008). The ability to understand and process feelings after the loss of a loved one has ignited writers' interest in writing on the subject in literary studies as well. Alfred Tennyson and his work *In Memoriam* is an example. Tennyson's poem *In Memoriam* was inspired by his grief over the death of his friend, Arthur Henry Hallam. Thematic research was used to discover agony, rumination, and disbelief, which may reflect the psychological concept of grief. According to the findings, grief may represent an emotional willingness to acknowledge the loss of something precious as well as a sense of inner peace that comes with letting go of a struggle to recover what has been lost.

**Keywords:** agony, rumination, disbelief, Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam*



## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Alfred Tennyson's *In Memoriam* is a vast poem of one-hundred-and-thirty-one sections of different lengths that include a prologue and epilogue. *In Memoriam* is inspired by the grief Tennyson felt at the death of his friend, Arthur Henry Hallam. The poem portrays several intellectual issues of the Victorian Age such as the meaning of life and death and becoming resigned or accustomed to the sense of loss. The verses, in general, show the development of the poet's acceptance and understanding of his friend's death. This paper will explore three notions that can be found in the poem which are agony, rumination, and disbelief.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The potential influence of storytelling extends beyond reflecting practices and welcomed empathy of memoir; fiction and poetry, too, may help us remember the basic oddities of the human situation. Indeed, as Oyebode points out, the goal of a fiction writer writing about insanity is to "disassociate the reader from the sign of insanity" (Oyebode, 2013). This separation allows people to recognise the shock of divergence from the usual as experienced in burnout. It is, as Oyebode puts it, a 'opportunity to step back from [the] world, to examine it, before immersing ourselves in it again, for better or worse' (Oyebode, 2013).

Perhaps now is a good moment to think about implementing such tactics for both professionals and patients. Many writers suggest that in medicine, humanities and poetry are often seen as purely recreational interests (Murphy & Franz, 2018). 'Within palliative care, however, there has been a long-standing interest in how poetry may assist patients and health workers find purpose, consolation, and delight,' writes Davies. Poetry has been shown to enhance listening, attention, observation, and analytical abilities. It helps junior physicians to reflect on their patients' disease experiences. It may encourage inventiveness, empathy, and the realization that much is outside the scope of doctors' abilities (Purton and Page, 2010).

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

The poem was analyzed using thematic analysis which uses 6 phases which are familiarizing self with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report.



#### **4. MAIN RESULTS**

The concept of agony comes first and foremost. According to Andrew Sanders in High Victorian Literature, the concept of sadness in the poem *In Memoriam* is a "...metrical representation of intense sadness [and] the 'mechanic exercise'... [of writing it]." (235.) These two elements may be found throughout the poem, particularly in section five. The first is a metrical representation of intense mourning. Each line in this part employs an ABBA rhyme scheme in order to be poetic while still conveying the gravity of the persona's anguish. Here's an example of a stanza from this section:

I sometimes hold it half a sin (A)  
To put in words the grief I feel; (B)  
For words, like Nature, half reveal (B)  
And half conceal the Soul within. (A)        (V, 1-4)

The protagonist in this stanza finds it difficult to convey his anguish as his heart breaks. The persona is also uncomfortable using words to express his pain since the words that come to him do not accurately portray how he feels. As a result, the persona believes he is lying and committing a sin by not being honest.

The second step is the 'mechanic exercise' of writing about your sadness. The persona believes that writing about his sadness is limited by the words that come to mind at that given point of writing. Instead of being able to articulate how his heart and head feel into appropriate words, the process of writing down his sentiments seems limiting (mechanical). The words he writes can only serve to repress rather than relieve the anguish he is experiencing. This is evident in the third verse of Section 5:

But, for the unquiet heart and brain,  
A use in measured language lies:  
The sad mechanic exercise;  
Like dull narcotics, numbing pain.        (V, 5-8)

Aside from the two reasons raised by Sanders, there are two more noteworthy aspects of agony: loss is prevalent and the circumstance is gloomy. Losing a significant person in one's life is a difficult experience for everyone. Well-wishers who express their sympathies to a person who has experienced a devastating loss in their life will often mention that losing a loved one is a typical occurrence. However, the person who has lost a loved one does not totally agree with the preceding, since their loved one was taken away from them quickly and unexpectedly. The character in the poem *In Memoriam* feels precisely the same way, as though the person he loved was abruptly snatched away.

This is seen in the opening verse of Section Six:

One writes that 'Other friends remain'  
That 'Loss is common to the race'



And common is the commonplace, (VI, 1-3)

The persona goes on to state that telling him that loss is a normal occurrence does not make it any easier for him to accept the reality that he had lost a loved one. It only briefly relieves the pain he suffers in the early hours of the day (morning), but by nightfall, the ache has reappeared.

This is evident in verse two of section six:  
That loss is common would not make  
My own less bitter, rather more:  
Too common! Never morning wore  
To evening, but some heart did break. (VI, 4-6)

Following that, the persona's position seems to be dismal. The persona's surroundings cannot help but shift his attitude from mourning to acceptance. Even when the persona is at home, he believes that his surroundings do not assist to change his attitude. This is seen in the opening verse of Section 7:

Dark house, by which once more I stand  
Here in the long unlovely street,  
Doors, where my heart was used to beat  
So quickly, waiting for a hand, (VII, 1-4)

Home is often a location where the heart resides and where one may be happy and comfortable. To suggest a house is dark is to imply that it is a sad place.

Even when the character is at home, he is unhappy. He goes on to say that the street where his home is located is a "long unlovely street." The view from his window does not satisfy him either. Then, while glancing at the entrance to his residence, persona feels a need for human contact. It is safe to presume that the persona misses the presence of his loved one at home. This is because the door might be seen as a portal to his emotions and memories. By glancing at the front entrance of the house, the persona recalls happy times spent with his loved one and want to relive those times:

A hand that can be clasp'd no more-  
Behold me, for I cannot sleep,  
And like a guilty thing I creep  
At earliest morning to the door. (VII 5-8)

The persona claims that he is unable to sleep since he is unable to clasp hands with his sweetheart. As a result, he acts irrationally. Instead of walking on two feet, the character goes slowly on his hands and knees ("creep") to the door early in the morning in the hopes that his lover would return to him and they would be able to enjoy one other's company. Unfortunately for the character, his wish to see his loves does not come true. As a result, the



concept of sadness in the poetry In Memoriam demonstrates that the persona believes his condition is hopeless since his lover cannot return to him. The persona also believes that loss is uncommon, and that his lover was abruptly stolen from him. In addition, the persona claims that the act of writing about his loss does not adequately represent his sentiments. Because of his limited capacity to explain the actual thoughts he wishes to represent, he is unable to describe how his heart and mind actually feel at the death of his lover.

The second concept is that of rumination. According to Andrew Sanders in High Victorian Literature, the topic of reflection in the poem In Memoriam may be viewed via the passage of time: “the passing of time stand both for a personal progress in understanding and for a larger acceptance of...change” (325). Following the moment of sadness induced by the realisation of his lover's death, the persona enters a stage of reflection in which he examines the time spent together with his beloved.

Tennyson's anguish is palpable in the early sections of the poem. In an intricate way, he writes about his sadness and how it affects him. He is unable to really consider the current and future periods he will have to spend apart from his sweetheart. Tennyson recognises this, and in the latter sections of his poem, he spends time pondering how his present and future would come out. Section twenty-one, stanza one, is an example of this:

I sing to him that rests below,  
And, since the grasses round me wave,  
I take the grasses of the grave,  
And make them pipes whereon to blow. (XXI, 1-4)

According to the character, he is visiting his beloved's grave. He can now sing and play a tune for his loved one on a grass-made pipe. The persona's mood shift from mourning to acceptance may be seen here. A person who is still suffering from a great deal of sadness would be unable to sing, much alone play a melody on a pipe for the person who had died. Travelers passing by the beloved's tomb observe that persona acting strangely to them from their own views. One traveller considers the persona's conduct of singing and playing his pipe at his beloved's grave to be weak, while another considers it to be sincere devotion for his beloved:

The traveler hears me now and then,  
  
And sometimes harshly, will he speak;  
'This fellow would make weakness weak,  
And melt the waxen hearts of men'. (XXI, 5-8)

Another traveller saw the persona's activity at his lover's grave, singing and playing his pipe, as a method for the persona to accept the truth that his lover had died while remaining sane: Another answers, 'Let him be,

He loves to make parade of pain,  
That with his piping he may gain



The praise that comes from constancy'. (XXI, 9-12)

These two travelers portray the outsider's point of view on the acceptance of the death of a loved-one. Although the persona had managed to accept the fact that his beloved had passed away, these two different travelers have opposing views on the way they think the persona should behave. The poet's intention in stating these two traveler's point of view shows how different people move on with their lives after a death of a loved one. The way a person chooses to move on with his life should be entirely up to him as each individual copes differently to change in their own lives. Some individuals can move on to other endeavors in their lives quite quickly while others need to take their own sweet time by letting a significant amount of time pass before doing so.

Personal growth is usually established when an individual can reflect and understand the past events and his current position in the world. When the persona reflects on his beloved's death, he realizes that his life is indeed short and he too will eventually die:

There sat the Shadow fear'd of man; (XXII, 12)

Who broke our fair companionship,

And spread his mantle dark and cold,  
And wrap thee formless in the fold,  
And dull'd the murmur on thy lip. (XXII, 15-16)  
[...]  
The Shadow sits and awaits for me. (XXII, 20)

According to the character, death ("the Shadow") has snatched his sweetheart and is now waiting for him. He was unable to recognise this reality since he was in a state of sadness. Only with the passage of time and the acceptance of change can the persona acquire personal development and an awareness of mortality.

As a result, the concept of reflection in the poem *In Memoriam* speaks to the persona's acceptance and knowledge of death. The third concept is scepticism. According to L. K. Hughes in *Poetry*, the concept of uncertainty in the poem *In Memoriam* is "...widespread theological uncertainty...increase in scientific knowledges and questioning of...authorities" (311).

This idea of disbelief occurs later in the poem, in sections fifty-four to fifty-six. The first is religious scepticism. Tennyson calls into question his own religious views by challenging the notion of divine punishment for good or wicked actions on Earth. He contends that a person or living creature may only expect for an equally good or equally awful punishment from God based on the conduct done on earth. This may be observed in the first two stanzas of Section 54:

Oh yet we trust that somehow good  
Will be the final goal of ill  
To pangs of nature, sins of will



Defects of doubt, and taints of blood; (LIV,1-4)

That nothing walks with aimless feet;

That no one life shall be destroy'd,  
Or cast as rubbish to the void,  
When God hath made the pile complete. (LIV,5-8)

Tennyson, on the other hand, believes that faith in divine punishment is exaggerated. Is it true that a person or living creature gets equal punishment from God for their actions on Earth? Tennyson is sceptical and provides an example of a natural occurrence. According to Tennyson, the worm is powerless against predators that may wish to devour it, but the moth is led to its own death by its infatuation with light from a fire:

That not a worm is cloven in vain;  
That not a moth with vain desire  
Is shrivell'd in a fruitless fire,  
Or but subserves another's gain. (LIV, 9-12)

The second factor is a rise in scientific understanding. Nature, according to Tennyson, is not a nice entity. Nature seems to be more concerned with the survival of the fittest species than with individual individuals. This natural idea is inspired by Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, which pertains to the notion of natural selection performed by Nature. Tennyson portrays Nature as a person who just bestows life or death on every thing under its dominion and then brutalises them:

'So careful of the type?' but no.  
From scarp'd cliff and quarried stone  
She cries, 'A thousand types are gone;  
I care for nothing, all shall go.(LVI, 1-4)

Instead of depending on the preceding section's belief in divine punishment, Tennyson now focuses on scientific data to determine the genuine notion of life and death on Earth from his perspective on life. Tennyson may now see life as an useless experience, since Nature is cruel to the beings under her control:

Who trusted God was love indeed  
And love Creation's final flaw-  
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw  
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed- ((LVI, 13-16)

Tennyson now longs for the voice of his deceased sweetheart to comfort him and ease the affects of Nature's insensitivity, as it is the only thing that is not a lie hidden behind a veil:



O life as futile then, as frail!  
O for thy voice to soothe and bless!  
What hope of answer, or redress?  
Behind the veil, behind the veil. (LVI, 25-28)

As a result, the poem In Memoriam's concept of doubt may be separated into theological uncertainty and a rise in scientific understanding. Religious doubt is represented by the questioning of the notion of divine punishment promised by God on earth. Tennyson prefers to perceive divine vengeance on Earth rather than in the hereafter. The advancement of scientific knowledge, and hence comprehension of nature, calls into question the futility of existence, since nature does not seem to care about the beings under its power.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

To summarise, Tennyson's poem In Memoriam is more than just a eulogy for his late friend Arthur Henry Hallam. It is a descriptive poetry that encourages readers to focus on the concepts of sadness, contemplation, and uncertainty in their own life.

### **Biography:**

Khairul Hisyam Baharuddin is a lecturer at the Faculty of Language Studies and Human Development, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, Malaysia and can be reached via email at khairulhisyam@umk.edu.my The title of the abstract is 'Agony, rumination and disbelief in Alfred Tennyson's In Memoriam.'





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