

Religious doubt and the force of nature



Although it is commonly understood that God created the natural world, Nature is often depicted as a force working in opposition to God and His creation. In lyric 56 of the poem *In Memoriam* by Lord Alfred Tennyson, Nature seems to have conquered God, leading to a cold, unfeeling world that shows no remorse for creation. This depiction, which today can be supported by evidence of mass extinction throughout history, presents an interesting way to view the way in which God and the world interact. Within this lyric, the speaker of the poem concludes that God is absent, leaving Nature's ruthlessness to determine that fate of mankind.

In Memoriam is a poem written by Lord Alfred Tennyson as a eulogy for the death of his friend and brother-in-law to be, Arthur Hallam, who died at the age of 22 (Robson 1186). The poem, which mimics the stages of grief, can be divided into four sections: despair, doubt, hope, and faith (Caleb 3/3/2016). Lyric 56 falls into the second stage of the grieving process and focuses on religious doubt. The rhyme scheme of this poem is ABBA, which enfolds the reader into the poem. This rhyme scheme also creates a monotonous droning, which is characteristic of grieving because when one grieves, everyday occurrences as well as important life events can seem mundane.

Additionally, *In Memoriam* is considered a hypertext, so while it may seem ideal to read the poem as one, each lyric can function on its own and do not need to be read in a strictly sequential order (Caleb 3/3/2016). Lyric 56 of *In Memoriam* opens with a conversation between the speaker and Nature, depicting Nature's carelessness with life on earth. The speaker questions Nature stating, "' So careful of the type?' but no.," which answers the question both shortly and abruptly, indicated by the two syllable response

and the concluding period (Tennyson 1). This opening group of lines is concluded with a response from Nature proclaiming that all life will be eradicated in a nondiscriminatory manner, much like the countless species that have already been lost (3-4).

Nature continues on in the conversation claiming, “ I bring to life, I bring to death: / The spirit does but mean the breath,” declaring not only Nature’s power over creation, but the fact that Nature has the power to create life, emphasized in the repetition of the phrase “ I bring” (6-7). In these lines, the word spirit is taken to mean “ the animating or vital principle in man (and animals); that which gives life to the physical organism” rather than “ The soul of a person, as commended to God” because Nature, rather than God, is claiming to be the source of creation and breath is the sole reason for animation (“ spirit”).

Furthermore, the rhyming of the words death and breath is significant, particularly considering the order. By using the word death prior to breath, Nature is echoing back to the multitude of species that went extinct prior to the creation of mankind. By proclaiming Nature as the creator and destroyer of life, God becomes discredited in His role as a divine and omnipotent being. Within this lyric, the speaker mocks God’s power and man’s devotion. Man’s devotion to God is expressed: Man, her last work, who seemed so fair, Such splendid purpose in his eyes, Who rolled the psalm to wintry skies, Who built him fanes of fruitless prayer, Who trusted God was love indeed (9-13) These lines depict both the effort exerted by a follower of God as well as the lack of reward that is received in return for his devotion. Most notably, these lines claim man to be a creation of Nature, rather than God, indicated by calling

man “ her last work.” In this lyric, the word wintry can be taken to mean “ devoid of fervor [sic] or affection,” which indicates that while the man is faithful and devoted to God, the kindness he expresses through song is not reciprocated (“ wintry”).

Additionally, the creation of temples and churches is described as fruitless. By claiming that creating houses of worship yields not results, the speaker is claiming that there is no God, and thus the man who believed “ God was love,” will only be disappointed by his faith as nothing will come of it (Tennyson 13). Along with discounting God as creator, this lyric highlights the animalistic characteristics of Nature. After discussing creation’s love of God, a break is indicated by the use of an m-dash, followed by the image: “ Though Nature, red in tooth and claw / With ravine, shrieked against his creed—” depicting the opposition between God and Nature (Tennyson 14-15). In this context, the redness is symbolizing blood, highlighting the violence of the battle between these two forces.

The use of the words tooth, claw, and shrieked also call attention to the primal attributes of Nature. This snippet of the battle ends in an m-dash, representing another break in the flow of the lyric. By choosing to shift focus rather than continuing to describe the combat points to the fact that this battle is not concluded, but ongoing. Instead, the speaker speculates the long-fought battles of mankind, questioning whether all the progress will simply be wiped out to, “ Be blown about the dessert dust, / Or sealed within the iron hills?” (Tennyson 19-20). Whether mankind becomes dust or fossilized, all knowledge of the accomplishments and hardships man faced will be lost, making current life, as well as all the life that has come before,

insignificant. At the conclusion of this lyric, the speaker falls into utter despair, completely doubting the existence of God. In the final four lines, the speaker concludes that Nature is the ultimate force present in the world, and that divinity is absent: O life as futile, then as frail! O for thy voice to sooth and bless! What hope of answer, or redress? Behind the veil, behind the veil. (Tennyson 25-28) The speaker's despair at his conclusions regarding the absence of God, as indicated by the exclamation point, express that life lacks purpose and that the efforts of mankind can be easily destroyed at Nature's whim. While the speaker cries out for solace from God, again indicated by the punctuation, his religious doubt will not allow him to continue on believing in God, which is indicated by the concluding line " behind the veil, behind the veil." In this sentence, the word veil has a dual meaning. One meaning of this phrase could be that it is an allusion " to the next world," but a veil is also, " something which conceals, covers, or hides" (" veil"). In this context, a combination of both definitions serves to deduce the meaning of the phrase: the veil, an allusion to afterlife, also serves to conceal the fact that there is no afterlife or divine presence. This double meaning can also be deduced by the rhyming of the words frail and veil, indicating that the disproof of an afterlife is imminent.

Furthermore, this phrase is repeated to highlight the speaker's skepticism and hopelessness, which again ultimately points to the absence of a divine being. Lyric 56 of *In Memoriam* highlights a low point in the speaker's religious doubt in which the speaker concludes that Nature, not God, is the creator of life, as well as the ultimate force causing extinction. Doubt, an

important stage in the grieving process, is one that cannot be ignored, particularly in regard to religion when tragedy strikes.

Untimely death, natural disasters, terrorism, and senseless violence are all events that occur much too frequently, leading people to question how there can be any God amidst the violence, let alone a merciful and loving God.

Although doubt is an unavoidable part of the grieving process, it is followed by a resurgence of hope and ultimately faith.

Works Cited

Caleb, Amanda. "Structure of In Memoriam" PowerPoint Presentation.

Victorian Literature, Dallas, PA. 3 March 2016.

Robson, Catherine "In Memoriam A. H. H." The Norton Anthology of English Literature. Ed. Catherine Robson. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012.

1186. Print. Tennyson, Lord Alfred. "In Memoriam A. H. H." The Norton Anthology of English Literature. Ed. Catherine Robson. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012. 1187-1235. Print.

"spirit" Oxford English Dictionary. Web. 28 March 2016. "veil" Oxford

English Dictionary. Web. 28 March 2016. "wintry" Oxford English Dictionary.

Web. 28 March 2016.