

# Essay on the theme of death in emily dickinsons

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



## **“ Because I Could not Wait for Death,”**

and

### **Tennyson’s “ In Memoriam”**

This is an essay comparing the similarities and differences between Emily Dickinson’s poem “ Because I Could not Stop for Death,” and Lord Alfred Tennyson’s “ In Memoriam.” Both poet suffered bereavement of people who were very close to them and from this pain they produce their masterpieces.

## **The Theme of Death in Emily Dickinson’s**

“ Because I Could not Wait for Death,”

and

### **Tennyson’s “ In Memoriam”**

Lord Alfred Tennyson and Emily Dickinson are legendary poets. They had both experienced the sting of death and write from deep within their souls about it. In Tennyson’s “ In Memoriam,” and Dickinson’s “ Because I Could not Wait for Death,” there are many similarities and contrasts, nonetheless, one thing is clear about both poets, they were genuinely intrigued with life after death.

Dickinson and Tennyson were born twenty-one years apart and thousands of miles separated them. However, they share one common thread, at an early age they were touched by the icy hands of death when Emily lost her best friend and cousin and Tennyson lost his best friend and the man who should have become his bother-in-law. The depth of their sorrow pours into their

poetry and Dickinson wrote her ever popular poem, "Because I Could not Stop for Death," and Tennyson wrote his masterpiece "In Memoriam."

Similarity at a glance of the two poems; both poems use four lines stanza; and as she usually does, Dickinson's poem is free verse. Though Dickinson's poem is short and explicit Tennyson's poem is an elegy to his friend. "In 1850 Mr [sic] Tennyson gave to the world under the title of "In Memoriam," perhaps the richest oblation ever offered by the affection of friendship at the tomb of the departed, the memory of Arthur Henry Hallam, who died suddenly in 1833" (Tennyson 1969). Tennyson follows the "abba" rhyming scheme. While Dickinson wrote many different versions of her poem, Tennyson wrote many sections to his poem over a three year period. Both poets use figurative language to convey the imagery in their poems.

In her poetry, Dickinson personifies death, she gives it a gender; she made it a gentleman caller. Unlike Tennyson, she pays no tribute to her loved one(s), she does not go through different stages of grieving. She accepts death and acknowledges the fact that one must die, and when death comes calling it does not book any argument—it is time to go, ready or not, you will get on the death train, "He kindly stopped for me;/The carriage held but just ourselves/ And Immortality." Dickinson begins her poem describing the death march; Tennyson begins his with praise to God, more importantly His son Jesus. As a matter of fact Tennyson spends the first seven stanzas of the prologue praising God. He concedes that he has never seen God, nonetheless when he looks around he knows that there must be a divine hand that orders everything so completely in place. Therefore he concludes

that God is there and he accepts His presence as creator and that is the reason he begins his poem: “ 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.”

Dickenson’s entire poem symbolizes death as a journey and the word “immortality” at the end of the first stanza demonstrates that she is confident that there is a place beyond the grave. Dickinson describes the ride as slow, so slow one could dismount if it were an ordinary ride. The slowness hints to the fact that once the death trip begins there is no return and there is no hurry, it has all of eternity to get to its final destination.

### **Emily Dickinson uses remembered images of the past to clarify infinite**

conceptions through the establishment of a dialectical relationship between reality

and imagination, the known and the unknown.[1] By viewing this relationship

holistically and hierarchically ordering the stages of life to include death and

eternity, Dickinson suggests the interconnected and mutually determined nature of

the finite and infinite.[2]” (Shaw 1991).

In many of her biographies Dickinson is recorded as accepting Christianity; and though she was never affiliated with a religion she spends much time wondering about her redemption. Tennyson spends the last four stanzas of the prologue asking for forgiveness. He apologizes for his weakness for being

weak knowing that the Lord gives life and He takes it; and the time of death is not for anyone to decide. Tennyson chastises himself for grieving when the Lord's will is done. Meaning that the demise of his dearest friend was a command from God; and he has no right to weep so intensely, he feels that he was arguing with God, and questioning His judgment. He says in stanza eleven; "Forgive my grief for one removed,/Thy creature, whom I found so fair./I trust he lives in thee, and there/I find him worthier to be loved." The fact that Tennyson believes in an afterlife and is convinced that his friend lives with God.

Dickinson continues her poem describing the death expedition, and unlike Tennyson who had suffered loss as she does, she only contemplates eternity. Dickinson presents death as tenacious and cajoling. She puts away her work and her leisure time, she is not well dressed for the trip but she feels that at some point, over yonder she will dress appropriately. Death gives its occupant a panoramic view of what his/her life has been. "We paused before a house that seemed/ A swelling of the ground;" meaning she stopped before her grave. In the last stanza she speaks of eternity as it is described in the song, "Amazing Grace." "When we've been there ten thousand years/We'll have more days to sing God's praise than when we first began."

The drive is a symbol that shows her lifetime on earth, from her childhood to adulthood. Now she is leaving the life she knows on earth to a life she does not yet fully comprehend. She speaks of the ripening grain, and the dying sun, life ebbing, death is near. The image of the children playing suggests a

period of growth, fertility progressing through maturity to harvest. As that season dies it makes way for new growth. It is the progression of the human race—death and rebirth. Human grows old and die and their children mature and produce children of their own (web n. d.).

Like Dickinson Tennyson uses imagery thorough out his poem; as he leaves the prologue he carries his grief into section one where he personifies grief, love, darkness, and death “ Let Love clasp Grief lest both be drown'd,/Let darkness keep her raven gloss:/ Ah, sweeter to be drunk with loss,/To dance with death, to beat the ground.” If love clasp grief they can save each other but if they are alone they might drown. Darkness is described as black with a shine as the raven’s feathers. Another symbol is the eye(s). Everyone knows that the eyes are tunnels into the soul; one can pretend to be laughing, to be happy but it is very hard to hide the pain in the eyes. All through the poem the eyes or tears are one of his most used symbol or imagery. “ The brows and eyes are mentioned numerous times throughout In Memoriam,. The eyes are tied into some of the speaker's grief stage It is from eyes that tears flow, which are a physical showing of his pain. ‘ Mine eyes have leisure for their tears.”

Both Tennyson and Dickinson use their writings to express their sorrow; In Dickinson’s writing she bravely faces death; on the other hand Tennyson spends three years in self-pity, even though a master piece emerges from his mourning it lasted too long. Hallman was going to marry his sister, not him. One thing this sadness does is bring him closer to God. The writing of both poets seems to be catachresis for them, and it sends Tennyson to find

solace in the Devine. " 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. " Tennyson indicates that he understands that God is the ultimate giver and he gives and he takes in his own time. Unfortunately for Dickinson's she does not find answers to her questions.

Kurt Harris (2006), states that Tennyson does not know what to do with his grief, in section forty-four Tennyson induces the image of a baby on his mother's breast. This image is the guide to recognize the association that sandwiches language and touch in the poem. The misery of the speaker leaves a deep void that the speaker cannot find language to express. Utilizing the hypothesis " of Winnicott, Klein, Kristeva, and Abraham and Torok," he continues essay saying " that the text produced by the speaker, who calls forth the universal foundational lost object (the mother) in semiotic (maternal and poetic) language, serves as a mediating object between the mourning, infantilized speaker and his empathetic, maternalized ideal reader."

Tennyson's poem is a eulogy, an elegy, and a tribute to God and his dear friend Hallman, and this is the biggest difference between it and the poem of Dickinson. Whereas Dickinson uses her pain to write several poems, Tennyson uses his to write over a three year period what almost seems an epic poem. In her poem Dickinson despite her pain accepts death as inevitable and her greatest concern is the afterlife. Tennyson believes there is God and even more than Dickinson believes that one goes to heaven after death since he says over and over and in different ways that his friend is

with God. As the reader concludes that Tennyson has finished his long lamentation over his friend, he asks for forgiveness and acknowledges God as the ultimate decision maker, he slips back into unhappiness.

T. S. Eliot was right when he called this poem “ the most unapproachable of all his [Tennyson’s] poems,” if there is ever a poem that that has lost structure this poem is it. Yes the writer’s use of syntax is good and so does his use of figurative language, nonetheless the writer slips back and forth as fast as a pendulum. The length alone of this poem makes it a tedious job to study. The themes are not unified and they are not kept together. The reader does not have the luxury to move efficiently from one theme to the next.

This is what his friend Edward Fitzgerald says about him as reported in Matthew Campbell’s book (1999):

**His poem I never did greatly affect; nor can I learn to do so:  
it is full of finest**

things, but it is monotonous, and has that air of being evolved by a Poetical

Machine of the highest order. So it seems to be with him now, at least to me,  
the

Impetus, the Lyrical oestrus, is gone It is the cursed inactivity (very pleasant  
to

me who am no Hero) of this 19th century which has spoiled Alfred, I mean  
spoiled him for the great work he ought now to be entering upon

In section ninety-five Tennyson goes from honoring God, believing in His  
creative ability to have mystic encounter with his dead friend Henry Hallman.

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Tennyson should have ended the poem here, at section ninety-five. Instead he speaks of his mystic visit with his friend Hallman and start over with his dirge. The reason the poem was written is to honor his dead friend; now he has come full circle; his friend comes back to visit, this is the climax of the poem. There is only one reason Tennyson would have continued this poem, he knows deep down that this is not Hallman. Also he could still believe it is Hallman but he has lost his best friend twice, forever believing that what he saw is real leaves him even more distressed.

As the poem comes to a close, this is a good example of Tennyson's erratic movements; Tennyson concludes that he did not visit with his friend, which was a tremble let down. Tennyson has accepted the fact that his friend lives in a better place and he is not coming back; he realizes that any kind of encounter with his friend would only be an illusion. Again he revisits his theme, and is again overwhelmed by sadness. Tennyson speaks about friendship, he speaks about family, he speaks about God and praise, and he speaks about love. He uses friendship as a symbol of love and marriage. As Tennyson returns to his themes he thinks of nature and like Dickinson he concludes that for life to continue on earth there must be death to produce rebirth.

Like Dickinson, Tennyson isolated himself, although no one knows the exact reason why she left society; everyone knows Tennyson's reason for his isolation. Driven by pain Tennyson isolates himself and his heart, unable to comprehend how someone so dear to him can be taken from this earth. Not like Dickinson, he states that this seclusion is temporary. After all his clashes of emotions he ends his elegy basking peacefully in the consciousness that

his friend Hallman " was a noble type / Appearing ere the times were ripe."

This poem helped Tennyson to settle the dilemma of his faith, and his perception of God.

Early in the poem Hallman's death becomes a symbol of the impending resurrection and Tennyson's hope that one day the human race will be redeemed and returned to its endemic glory. " 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;/That nothing walks with aimless feet;/That not one life shall be destroy'd,/Or cast as rubbish to the void,/When God hath made the pile complete."

It is uncanny that Tennyson continues the poem after he had this epiphany of God and the human race. Tennyson ends his poem with biblical typology, while Dickinson ends her with the allusion to the popular song, " Amazing Grace."

Throughout the poem Tennyson's constantly reaffirms his themes and he ends it almost the way it begins, a tribute to God. Dickinson does not discuss her religious beliefs but she alludes to it. " Since then 'tis centuries, and yet each/Feels shorter than the day/I first surmised the horses' heads/Were toward eternity." Dickinson treats eternity differently than Tennyson. She believes that one goes from death into eternity, wherever that is, but Tennyson beliefs are a bit confusing; he is assured that his friend is in heaven nonetheless, he believes in the resurrection, If the dead goes to heaven what is the purpose of the resurrection. More importantly, both poets acknowledge God, even though their perception is different.

Emily Dickinson and Lord Alfred Tennyson never met, never heard of each other; have produced magnum opus in poetry with similarities and differences, their great gift to the literary world cannot be denied. They pour out on pages their misery. One poet gains fame in his lifetime, the other posthumously, yet they have climbed to the mecca of poetry.

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