UNIT 4 : LORD ALFRED TENNYSON : “TEARS, IDLE TEARS”

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4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- familiarise yourself with the life and works of Lord Alfred Tennyson
- explain the poem “Tears, Idle Tears”
- describe the context and the language of the poem
- appreciate the poem in its totality

4.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces you to the poem “Tears, Idle Tears” that occurs in the beginning of Canto IV of *The Princess: A Medley* (1847), a long narrative poem by Lord Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892) who is considered to be a representative of the Victorian age. The poem is a touching lyric sung by one of the maidens who resides in the castle of Princess Ida. The Princess is an independent young woman. She has retreated from society with some

of her female companions to start a school from which men are excluded. The princess is pursued there by the prince, who is in love with her. He comes to the castle disguised as a woman. In the original poem, "The Princess" when this lyric is sung, Princess Ida is relaxing with her friends and the prince at sunset. That is why the mood of the poem is sad.

The poem represents the passion of love between a man and woman. It is also a poem about the impact of the past. The speaker laments the passing of time; he cannot relive the cherished experiences of the past anymore. And there is a sudden welling up of tears in the speaker's eyes but the cause of the tears is unknown.

In the title, we can notice the repetition of the word 'Tears'. It indicates the nature of the poet's sadness as felt by him. It has no apparent cause. The tears are rather involuntary; but are also 'idle' because they cannot free the poet from despair.

There are many famous poems in English on the same theme of the past. You may have heard about Wordsworth. His "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality" is also about the bygone days of the poet's childhood. You may read the poem and compare "Tears, Idle Tears" with it.

It is also important to know that the other major Victorian poet who is often contrasted with Tennyson is Robert Browning. Tennyson strikes a note of sadness because he was sensitive to the loss of faith in his age, but Browning is a poet of optimism. "Tears, Idle Tears" is, however, one of the finest expressions of a sensitive poet's sense of despair.

In this unit, you will get a bird's-eye view of the life and works of Tennyson and an explanation of the poem prescribed. You will also get an elaboration of the poetic techniques employed, and the style and language used by the poet.

4.3 LORD ALFRED TENNYSON: THE POET

Tennyson is undoubtedly a major poetic voice of the Victorian age (1837-1900), and is comparable in eminence with Wordsworth in the Romantic age. He was identified with the age itself, to the extent that he is called the

'trumpeter' of the English empire. But he was sensitive to the general human condition and possessed great poetic skill with an extraordinary ear for cadence and rhythm.

4.3.1 His Life

Tennyson was born on August 6, 1809, in Lincolnshire, one of the eight children of Reverend George Clayton Tennyson, the rector of Somersby, a tiny village full of orchards and vast green fields. He spent his childhood amidst poverty and had his early education under his father. From 1817 to 1820, he was at school at Loath. In 1828, he entered the Trinity College, Cambridge, and spent three years there. His Cambridge life is remarkable for his friendship with Arthur Hallam who died a premature death. Tennyson immortalised this tragic event by writing *In Memoriam A. H. H.* (1850).

His personal life was not very happy in the beginning. His father was an alcoholic which made his mother very distressed and depressed. Two of his brothers became insane. Thus, from the beginning, he was familiar with mental illness, poverty and other troubles. His poetry reflects many such unhappy moments of his personal life. Another important fact about his life is that he was both exhilarated and disturbed by the social and industrial changes taking place in the Victorian England.

Tennyson was a typical Victorian intellectual with wide reading and the ability to debate and discuss contemporary beliefs. He was aware of the latest development in intellectual debates. Thus he was aware of the contemporary conflict between religious belief and ideas like "Darwinism" and "Natural Selection". He had inherited the Romantic idealism of great predecessors like Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats. You may be interested to know that he succeeded Wordsworth as Poet Laureate in 1850. The same year he married Emily Sellwood. Tennyson died in 1892.



LET US KNOW

The year 1830 marks the break between the Romantic and Victorian ages. The great Romantics were Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron and Keats. By 1830, Shelley, Byron and Keats had already died and Wordsworth and Coleridge ceased to write anything of significance. Tennyson began the Victorian phase of the 19th century with his first collection of poems *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, published in 1830.

4.3.2 His Works

Tennyson had a prolific literary career that spans nearly six decades. In 1827, he published an early collection of poems, *Poems by Two Brothers*, which includes works by his brothers, Frederick and Charles. This marks his beginning as a published poet, followed by his own collection, *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830). This collection of poems introduced him as a poet capable of describing and reflecting on the external nature as well as exploring the 'landscape of the mind'. It goes to his credit as a poet that he could bring the two together. The inner states of mind are symbolised by the description of the external nature. Tennyson published *Poems* in December 1832. This volume was received with savage criticism in the *Quarterly Review*. After this, Tennyson did not publish anything for ten years. This period is called the 'ten years silence' and it was marked by his loss of direction and emotional instability.

He also suffered a great shock at the untimely death of his friend Hallam. In 1842, he published *Poems* in two volumes, the first volumes being composed earlier. This volume includes such masterly poems as "The Lady of Shallot" and "The Lotos Eater"; the second volumes contained newly composed poems such as"Locksley Hall", "Ulysses" etc. In 1847, Tennyson published *The Princess: A Medley*. *The Princess* consists of a Prologue, a conclusion and seven parts. They tell the story of Princess Ida, daughter of King Gama. She prefers to live alone along with her female companions after rejecting marriage. The smaller piece "Tears, Idle Tears" is included in this volume.

Other notable inclusions are the memorable songs like "Sweet and low, sweet and low", "The splendour falls on castle walls".

The crowning glory of Tennyson's poetic career is, however, the immortal poem, *In Memoriam*, written as an elegy on the death of his friend, Arthur Hallam, and published in 1850. It was written in 132 short, connected lyrics. It is interesting to know that the poem was published anonymously and people did not recognise it as Tennyson's poem. Though, some verses were written soon after his friend's death in 1833, the poet had newly added verses to the poem. You may be interested to know that the title was suggested by Emily Sellwood, his future wife. Besides this philosophical poem and the masterly *The Princess: A Medley*, Tennyson wrote many poems on some contemporary happenings.

These poems were very popular during his days. In 1852, he produced one of the most successful public poems, "Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington" and in 1854, one of the most popular English patriotic poems "Charge of the Light Brigade". "Maud" (1854) is another memorable poem, which is a dramatic monologue, a characteristic Victorian poetic form. This poem, written during the Crimean War (1854) has three parts, and deals with a wide range of themes such as love, madness, war, social justice and equality. *Idylls of the King* (1859-72) is a series of poems on the popular stories of King Arthur written in a loose epic form.

It is clear from the above discussion that Tennyson wrote on a great range of subjects. Many modern critics have shown a lack of sympathy with Victorian ideals. It is instructive to know that it was T. S. Eliot who restored the position of Tennyson as a major Victorian poet.



LET US KNOW

The "**dramatic monologue**" is a poetic form which consists of a speech by a single character who reveals his innermost thoughts and feelings to a listener. The "dramatic monologue", unlike the soliloquy, is, however not written for the stage nor does it form a part of a play. Robert Browning was the most prominent exponent of the dramatic monologue, and Tennyson also used it several times. T. S. Eliot uses a form of the monologue, the 'interior monologue'.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS



Q.1. In which year was *In Memoriam* published? Whose death is lamented in the poem?

Q.2. What is a dramatic monologue? Name a dramatic monologue written by Tennyson.

Q.3. Which period in Tennyson's writing career is called the "ten years silence" and why?

4.4 THE TEXT OF THE POEM

"Tears Idle Tears"

Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,
Tears from the depth of some ***divine despair***
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes.
In looking on the happy Autumn- fields,
And thinking of the days that are no more.
Fresh as the first beam glittering on a sail,
That brings our friends up from the ***underworld***,
Sad as the last which reddens over one
That sinks with all we love below the verge;
So sad, so fresh, the days that are no more.
Ah, sad and strange as in dark summer dawns
The earliest pipe of half-awaken'd birds
To dying ears, when unto dying eyes
The ***casement*** slowly grows a glimmering square:
So sad, so strange, the days that are no more.
Dear as remember'd kisses after death.
And sweet as those by ***hopeless fancy feign'd***
On lips that are for others: deep as love,
Deep as first love and wild with all ***regret***;
O ***Death in Life***, the days that are no more.



Divine Despair: the hopeless yearning of man for complete fulfillment in the world. Man has a divine origin. The despair is perhaps that of God for the inability of man to achieve joy and happiness.
Underworld:the place under the earth where people are believed to go when they die.
Casement: window.
Hopeless fancy feign'd:to be kissed by a hopeless lover.
Regret:feeling of sadness because of something that has happened.
Death in Life: in a longing for the dead days, they are revived and lived once again.

4.4.1 Context of the Poem

Published in 1847 as a part of *The Princess*, "Tears, Idle Tears" deals with the subject of women in the modern world and presents the theme of higher education of women. The princess, who rejects marriage, wishes to educate women keeping them entirely free from male influence. Thus the subject of the poem is of great contemporary interest. After a day's hard work, Princess Ida asks one of her maidens to sing a song to offer much-needed relaxation. The poem is the resultant song sung by the maiden.

As the title of the poem suggests, the poet expresses his feeling of sadness as well as sweetness. The poet tries to explain the meaning of sorrow by personifying it, but he finds no cause or source for the sorrow. He tries to find the meaning and significance of the beauty and splendour of the rich harvest of Autumn fields. One feels happy to see the Autumn fields full of ripe harvest. At the same time, there is an element of sadness that brings tears to the eyes. Thus, the strange feeling of sadness and sweetness of the poet has been suggested in the title of the poem.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.4. In which volume is the prescribed poem included?

Q.5.How does the poet combine the two different feelings?

4.4.2 Explanation of the Poem

The title of the poem suggests that it is about the feeling of sadness ("tears") but the cause of the sorrow is difficult to define; hence the tears are "idle tears". The poem consists of four stanzas. You can notice that in all the four stanzas the expression the "days that are no more" is a common ***refrain*** that ends the stanza. The opening words are simple and without any ambiguity. The poet speaks of the "tears" whose meaning and significance he is unable to define or understand. They are caused by some "divine despair". Man has a divine origin. Until Darwin's discovery of "evolution", the Biblical story of man's origin and fall from paradise had



Refrain: the part of a song or a poem that is repeated after each verse.

Casement: window.

dominated the Christian mind. The tears are perhaps due to the inevitable death of mortal man. The sense of longing, for the poet, is also futile and there is a despair which is an essential part of human existence. This despair may well up in our eyes as "tears" but tears may also be caused by a happy moment such as "the happy Autumn fields". The last line of the first stanza mentions the sadness of remembering the days that are no more. Both the occasions naturally bring tears to our eyes; so they are both sad and sweet.

The second stanza continues this duality in the image of the ship that emerges before our eyes with the light of the morning sun glittering on its sail. The recollection of the past days can be both sweet and bitter. It is sweet to remember the joys of the past but bitter or painful to think that it brings to our mind a sense of loss. The image of the ship brings out this special mixture very clearly. The ship emerges from and returns to the land over the horizon. As the poem is essentially concerned with the memory of the past, the poet appropriately compares this feeling about bygone days to the experience one has when anticipating the arrival of friends from afar, and then seeing them sail away beyond the horizon as they return to faraway lands.

In the third stanza, we can notice the image of the dying man. You may notice the word "Ah" at the beginning of the stanza, suggesting a sense of pain. The speaker likens his emotions to those of a dying man who sees a summer dawn and hears birds piping outside his window. You can also notice the essential duality of life and death– the man is dying but the birds are chirping and the time is "dawn", the moment of the first appearing of light in the morning sky and, hence, the suggestion is that of a beginning. So the emotions experienced are sad and sweet, involving both death and life.The birds in the lines are "half-awaken'd", i.e., they are not fully awake but you can find the dying man is fully awake. You can also note the "dying ears" and "dying eyes". Both refer to the dying man. Being placed in the same line, the two phrases emphasise the gloom associated with death. The dying man's sight is failing but the ***casement*** seems to be glittering with the morning light. The memory of the past, the poet concludes, is similarly sad and strange.

Finally, as we reach the last stanza, we find that the speaker compares his feeling for the past to that of "remember'd kisses after death". It is not clear who dies and who lives on. The memory of the "remember'd kisses" in the past becomes sweet because of the distance in time, even when the beloved is no more. Sometimes, "kisses" can be unreal, mere imagination ("fancy") indulged in by a hopeless and rejected lover. But such kisses are equally sweet, even though the lips of the beloved are meant for others. The memory of the past lies deep in our heart like "love" in general or the "first love" which lasts the longest. Thus memory is as deep as the first love and as wild as the passionate sadness that the days have become and we can no longer get them back. The bygone days, suggested by the word "Death" are brought back to life through memory, but it is tinged with sadness with the realisation that those days are no more.

From the above explanation,you learn that "Tears, Idle Tears" is about memory of the past days. The poem is part of *The Princess* where a maiden sings the present lyric as a song. The song's purpose is to tell the listeners about sadness which comes from reflecting on the past. But when we view the poem outside the context of *The Princess* in which it first appeared, we find that the major theme of the poem here is the sadness that accompanies our reflections on the past days. This sadness comes from the realisation that the joyful experiences of the past world never come back ("the days that are no more"), and never be enjoyed again. You may find it interesting to know what Tennyson himself said about the poem.

He said to his friend Frederick Locker-Lampson that the poem was motivated by the 'yearning that young people occasionally experience for that which seems to have passed away from them forever'. This statement agrees with Tennyson's own concern with the past and with his belief that man cannot relive his past times and experiences. However, we can observe that the poet has exercised considerable restraint in presenting his emotion.



LET US KNOW

"Tears, IdleTears" is a small lyric of a larger poem, "The Princess", which is about Princess Ida. The Princess lives with her female companions, rejecting marriage and male companionship, in a school she has founded for women's education, alone. A maiden sings the present lyric as a song.



ACTIVITY 4.1

1. Make a list of the images used by Tennyson to stress the combination of sweetness and sadness.
2. The poet mentions 'happy Autumn-fields'. Why are fields in autumn described as 'happy'?



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.6.What brings tears to the poet's eyes?

Q.7.What is the effect of past memory on the poet's mind?

Q.8. What does the poet mean by "happy Autumn-fields"?

Q.9. How is the present-time being expressed? Why are days in the past "strange"?



LET US KNOW

BLANK VERSE : Blank verse is unrhymed verse composed of lines that usually contain ten syllables and have stress on every second syllable.

TRANSFERRED EPITHET : Transferred epithet consists in the moving of an adjective from the word to which it properly belongs to another with which it is associated- such an epithet is said to be transferred. For example,

He spent a sleepless night.

He was engaged in a dishonest profession.



ACTIVITY 4.2

1. Compare the two poems, "Simon Lee" and "Tears, Idle Tears". Both are about the past. Can you describe in your own words how recollection of the past is different in each poem?



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.10.Which lines in the poem are most effective in conveying to us the sadness of the poet?

Q.11. What do you mean by 'transferred epithet'?

Q.12. "Ode to Autumn" is a poem by Keats/Shelley. Choose the right answer.

4.5 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

As far as the style and language of the poem are concerned, we are struck by the poet's handling of imagery and use of simple words. The imagery, particularly, focuses our attention on the melancholy and sense of irony which we experience with our contemplation of the passing of life. You can observe that in each stanza there is a simple example to illustrate our sense of loss. In the first stanza, for example, the poet describes a person looking at the "happy Autumn-fields". Autumn also indicates the coming of winter. One can reflect on the change of seasons and this reflection brings "tears, idle tears" to our eyes.

In the second stanza, you will note, this sense of loss is compared to the feeling of a person who is visited by his friends. The friends then leave him. This is a very difficult image. The person feels the joy of seeing the sunlight on the sail ("glittering on a sail") as the ship bringing his friends is seen from a distance; but the same friends would depart in the ship, leaving the person filled with sadness. Note the words Tennyson uses to describe the arrival and departure of the friends. When they arrive they appear to be coming "up from the underworld", and when they depart, the ship carrying them appears to sink "below the verge". This is the image of

a voyage. It has symbolic meaning of the voyage of life, passing from birth to death. Once the idea of death is indicated in the image of the ship bringing friends from the underworld, its logical connection with the next stanza can be seen in the mention of the "dying man" hearing the birds' notes at dawn. The speaker means that his 'idle tears' are like the tears of the dying man who wakes up in the summer dawn and hears the birds chirp. Here is a strong melancholic note apt to bring tears. In the final stanza, the tears are compared to those in the eyes of the lover who remembers with joy and regret his love affair that has ended without any hope of renewal. Such a person experiences the condition of "Death in Life" because he is alive but his happy past days are gone forever.

From the above discussion, it is clear that the complex subject of the poem is rendered comprehensible by the use of language and imagery – a talent in which Tennyson is unmatched.

We can also point out the words whose sounds echo the poet's feeling of sadness that causes tears to come to his eyes. The use of the words "tears"in the title is particularly striking with its repetition. Tennyson was acutely sensitive to sounds and had the gift of appealing to our ears even more than to our senses.Tennyson is considered the greatest Victorian poet largely because of his range and volume of poetic output. He was a consummate artist who could experiment with different poetic forms from lyric to dramatic monologue and had the capacity to suit the form to the subject. By "poetic technique" we mean the poetic devices used in a particular poem.

You may observe from the above explanation of the poem that the poem is a lyric meant to be sung by a particular maiden. The opening line speaks of "tears" and "idle tears" which may lead us to expect that there will be unrestrained emotions with the poet indulging in the most familiar theme of the recollection of the past. But we find a very compact poem with the emotions being firmly under control.

The poetic technique used in the poem takes into account some formal devices such as blank verse lines and an extensive use of images to convey the sense of sadness and sweetness as the two opposite qualities

of the human recollection of the past. You may also notice the meditative and conversational atmosphere and that each stanza is connected to the previous one by a closing phrase: "the days that are no more". This phrase is repeated to remind the reader of the passing of time. The use of imagery is also similarly directed towards conveying a sense of contrast between joy and sorrow with regard to our recollection of the past. Human memory is not selective. Therefore, the image of 'happy Autumn-fields' is followed by the image of a dying man.

Another technique used by the poet is personification. In the phrase "happy Autumn-fields", he has used a figure of speech called 'transferred epithet'. It is not the autumn fields which are happy but the person looking at them. A poetic effect is created by transferring the feeling from the person to the field.

Thus, it may be said that in "Tears, Idle Tears", Tennyson has achieved a great poetic effect by using the suitable, though conventional, techniques such as use of blank verse, figure of speech and imagery for his grave subject-matter which is the recollection of the past and how the recollections are apt to make us feel both sad and happy.



LET US KNOW

The word "underworld" means "the land of the dead". In the poem, it has the obvious meaning of the land to which the ship comes, and from which it departs. But its symbolic meaning is equally important as the world of the dead.



ACTIVITY 4.3

1. How appropriate is this poem for a maiden who is soothing a princess?
2. Why does Tennyson call the tears 'idle'?



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.13.What does the poet mean by "Death in Life"?

Q.14. What does the repetition of the word "tears" in the poem signify?



4.6 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learnt that Tennyson wrote the poem "Tears, Idle Tears" as a song to be sung by a maiden in the longer poem "The Princess : A Medley". In "The Princess", he shows Princess Ida as conducting a school for women to which men's entry is restricted. The poem is about our memory of the past which may be both sad and sweet. Never is the past always an unmixed blessing nor is our memory complete. As such, we shed tears for both the happy and unhappy past. A number of images have been used to describe memory, such as the image of the autumn fields, friends arriving and departing, a dying man and the half-awake birds' song at dawn etc. There is a sad, contemplative note through all the lines and Tennyson is particularly famous for the elegiac or mournful elements in his poetry.



4.7 FURTHER READING

1) *An Anthology of English Poetry*, Vol. 2 (For B.A. Major, B.A. Elective and M.A.) Gauhati University.

2) Daiches, David (2001). *A Critical History of English Literature*.Vol 4 New Delhi: Allied Publishers.

3) Ousby, Ian (1992). *Companion to Literature in English*. London: Cambridge University Press.

4) *Poetry Down the Ages*. The Board of Studies (English).Mizoram University.Orient Longman.

4.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: 1850, elegy on the death of his friend Arthur Hallam.

Ans to Q No 2: A poetic form (Elaborate), Maud (1854)

Ans to Q No 3: The period following the published work *Poem* in December, 1832 which met violent criticism, marked by his loss of direction and emotional instability.

Ans to Q No 4: Part of *The Princess*.

Ans to Q No 5: Refer to 4.4.1 Context of the Poem

Ans to Q No 6: Refer to 4.4.2 Explanation of the Poem

Ans to Q No 7: Refer to 4.4.2 Explanation of the Poem

Ans to Q No 8: "Transferred Epithet" Refer to 4.4.2 Explanation of the Poem.

Ans to Q No 9: Refer to 4.4.2 Explanation of the Poem

Ans to Q No 10: Refer to 4.4 Text of the Poem

Ans to Q No 11: Poetic device– moving of an adjective from the word to which it properly belongs to another with which it is associated.

Ans to Q No 12: John Keats.

Ans to Q No 13: Refer to 4.5 Style and Language

Ans to Q No 14: Tears– words whose sounds echo the poet's feeling of sadness that causes tears to come to his eyes.

4.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q.1. What is the central idea in the poem?

Q.2. Describe the images that Tennyson uses in the poem to convey his sweet and sad feelings.

Q.3. Discuss the life and works of Lord Alfred Tennyson

Q.4. "So sad, so fresh, the days that are no more". What "days" is the poet referring to?

Q.5. "O Death in Life, the days that are no more". What is referred to here? What effect do the days have on the poet's mind?

Q6. Explain with reference to the context.

a) "Tears from the depth of some divine despair
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes"

b) "In looking on the happy Autumn- fields,
And thinking of the days that are no more.
Fresh as the first beam glittering on a sail,
That brings our friends up from the underworld"

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