

Notes on Tears, Idle Tears by Lord Alfred Tennyson:

Summary

The speaker sings of the baseless and inexplicable tears that rise in his heart and pour forth from his eyes when he looks out on the fields in autumn and thinks of the past.

This past, (“the days that are no more”) is described as fresh and strange. It is as fresh as the first beam of sunlight that sparkles on the sail of a boat bringing the dead back from the underworld, and it is sad as the last red beam of sunlight that shines on a boat that carries the dead down to this underworld.

The speaker then refers to the past as not “fresh,” but “sad” and strange. As such, it resembles the song of the birds on early summer mornings as it sounds to a dead person, who lies watching the “glimmering square” of sunlight as it appears through a square window.

In the final stanza, the speaker declares the past to be dear, sweet, deep, and wild. It is as dear as the memory of the kisses of one who is now dead, and it is as sweet as those kisses that we imagine ourselves bestowing on lovers who actually have loyalties to others. So, too, is the past as deep as “first love” and as wild as the regret that usually follows this experience. The speaker concludes that the past is a “Death in Life.”

Form

This poem is written in blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter. It consists of four five-line stanzas, each of which closes with the words “the days that are no more.”

Commentary

“Tears, Idle Tears” is part of a larger poem called “The Princess,” published in 1847. Tennyson wrote “The Princess” to discuss the relationship between the sexes and to provide an argument for women’s rights in higher education. However, the work as a whole does not present a single argument or tell a coherent story. Rather, like so much of Tennyson’s poetry, it evokes complex emotions and moods through a mastery of language. “Tears, Idle Tears,” a particularly evocative section, is one of several interludes of song in the midst of the poem.

In the opening stanza, the poet describes his tears as “idle,” suggesting that they are caused by no immediate, identifiable grief. However, his tears are simultaneously the product of a “divine despair,” suggesting that they do indeed have a source: they “rise in the heart” and stem from a profoundly deep and universal cause. This paradox is complicated by the difficulty of understanding the phrase “divine despair”: Is it God who is despairing, or is the despair itself divine? And how can despair be divine if Christian doctrine considers it a sin?

The speaker states that he cries these tears while “looking on the happy autumn-fields.” At first, it seems strange that looking at something happy would elicit tears, but the fact that these are fields of autumn suggests that they bear the memories of a spring and summer that have vanished, leaving the poet with nothing to look forward to except the dark and cold of winter. Tennyson explained that the idea for this poem came to him when he was at Tintern Abbey, not far from Hallam’s burial place. “Tintern Abbey” is also the title and subject of a famous poem by

William Wordsworth. (See the “Tintern Abbey” section in the SparkNote on Wordsworth’s Poetry.) Wordsworth’s poem, too, reflects on the passage of time and the loss of the joys of youth. However, whereas Tennyson laments “the days that are no more” and describes the past as a “Death in Life,” Wordsworth explicitly states that although the past is no more, he has been compensated for its loss with “other gifts”:

That time is past,
And all its aching joys are now no more
And all its dizzy raptures. Not for this
Faint I, nor mourn nor murmur; other gifts
Have followed; for such loss, I would believe,
Abundant recompense.

Thus, although both Wordsworth and Tennyson write poems set at Tintern Abbey about the passage of time, Wordsworth’s poem takes on a tone of contentment, whereas Tennyson’s languishes in a tone of lament.

“Tears, Idle Tears” is structured by a pattern of unusual adjectives used to describe the memory of the past. In the second stanza, these adjectives are a chiasmic “fresh...sad...sad...fresh”; the memory of the birth of friendship is “fresh,” whereas the loss of these friends is “sad”; thus when the “days that are no more” are described as both “sad” and “fresh,” these words have been preemptively loaded with meaning and connotation: our sense of the “sad” and “fresh” past evokes these blossomed and withered friendships. This stanza’s image of the boat sailing to and from the underworld recalls Virgil’s image of the boatman Charon, who ferries the dead to Hades.

In the third stanza, the memory of the past is described as “sad...strange...sad...strange.” The “sad” adjective is introduced in the image of a man on his deathbed who is awake for his very last morning. However, “strangeness” enters in, too, for it is strange to the dying man that as his life is ending, a new day is beginning. To a person hearing the birds’ song and knowing he will never hear it again, the twittering will be imbued with an unprecedented significance—the dying man will hear certain melancholy tones for the first time, although, strangely and paradoxically, it is his last.

The final stanza contains a wave of adjectives that rush over us—now no longer confined within a neat chiasmic structure—as the poem reaches its last, climactic lament:

“dear...sweet...deep...deep...wild.” The repetition of the word “deep” recalls the “depth of some divine despair,” which is the source of the tears in the first stanza. However, the speaker is also “wild with all regret” in thinking of the irreclaimable days gone by. The image of a “Death in Life” recalls the dead friends of the second stanza who are like submerged memories that rise to the surface only to sink down once again. This “Death in Life” also recalls the experience of dying in the midst of the rebirth of life in the morning, described in the third stanza. The poet’s climactic exclamation in the final line thus represents a culmination of the images developed in the previous stanzas.