Tears, Idle Tears

POEM TEXT

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!

SUMMARY

I'm crying and crying and I don't know why. The tears seem to come from a deep sadness, which feels at the same time like it's something heavenly. This sadness begins in the heart before making its way to the eyes, as I look at the happy sight of these Autumn fields and think about the past.

These tears are as invigorating as the first sunbeam hitting the sail of a ship that carries our dead friends back up from the underworld. But these tears are also as sad as the last sunbeam reflecting off the sail of another ship, which carries everyone we love away over the horizon. It's so sad but also so invigorating to think about the past.

Really, it's as sad and strange as a dark summer morning when the first birds, still just half awake themselves, begin singing their song for someone who's on their deathbed, who can see the rising sunlight slowly filter through a window. It's so sad but also so strange to think about the past.

These tears are as rare and treasured as the memory of a dead lover's kisses. And they're as sweet as the kisses pictured by a hopeless imagination, hopeless because these imaginary kisses are with someone already romantically tied to somebody else. These tears are as deep as love itself, especially first love, and utterly consumed with regret. Oh, it's like bringing the dead to life again to think about the past!

THEMES

THE BITTERSWEET NATURE OF MEMORY AND LOSS

In “Tears, Idle Tears” the speaker wonders at the source of her “divine despair,” a deep but vague sadness brought about by looking at the autumn landscape and thinking about her past. Her tears are “idle” (meaning without a clear purpose or cause), but also linked throughout the poem to the death of friends, the memory of past love, and changes in nature. The lack of specific detail (such as the names of those friends or lovers) however, makes the poem a more general meditation on the bittersweet nature of memory, focused on the grief that arises when considering all that has been lost to the passage of time. The poem doesn’t seek to *explain* this grief, instead focusing on the poignant contrast of recalling "happy days"—which nonetheless makes the speaker sad because they "are no more."

The poem clearly connects the speaker's "divine despair" to a consideration of the nature of memory. For one thing she repeatedly returns to the refrain "the days that are no more," emphasizing that her grief is rooted in thinking about days that have come and gone. She's also notably "looking on the happy Autumn-fields." Autumn is a season associated with change and reflection, as the abundance of summer wanes and the metaphorical death of winter approaches. The fact that these fields are "happy," meanwhile, complicates the speaker's grief by underscoring the ability of memory to make people *both* joyful and sad at once.

This sense of contradiction extends throughout the poem, as the speaker’s tears become not simply "sad" but also "strange." This strangeness refers to the poignancy of the speaker’s grief, given that it arises from thinking about happy things. The oxymoron "divine despair" further hints at the paradoxical nature of memory: usually the word "divine" describes things that are unambiguously positive (it refers to God after all!), whereas "despair" suggests a complete loss of hope. The combination of two words with such opposite meanings demonstrates just how conflicted and confused—how

"strange"—the speaker's emotions are.

The speaker repeatedly returns to this idea, noting how her tears are both as "fresh" as the *first* sunbeam hitting the ship that brings *up* friends "from the underworld" and as "sad" as the *last* sunset which falls on another ship taking "all we love" *down* to the underworld. Her grief, then, is linked both to new life and to death, to beginnings and endings. It is again inextricable from a consideration of the passage of time.

The speaker echoes this idea when she connects her tears to "dark summer dawns" (since when were dawns, especially in summer, dark?) during which early birdsong is heard by "dying ears." Birds typically represent renewal and new life, but here are associated with death.

The confused state of the speaker's mind demonstrates the paradoxical power of memory, which is used to revive temporarily that which has been irretrievably lost. In other words, thinking about happy memories makes the speaker sad, because doing so is also a reminder of things that are over. The poem's closing refrain then declares that everything in the past is a form of "Death in Life." This final paradox can be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand, the past is as lost as the dead; on the other, death is contained "in Life," meaning that just like sunrise enlightens the night, memory can be used to enlighten the past. This gives the poem a bittersweet conclusion: the past is granted "fresh" life in the speaker's mind through her memories, yet those memories themselves are a reminder that the past is "no more."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16
- Line 20

LOVE AND DEATH

Although the speaker never confirms *exactly* what is causing her despair, she focuses her memories mostly on lost love—of both the romantic and platonic variety. Through this, the poem elevates the importance and power of loving relationships, comparing their ending to a kind of death in itself.

The poem first focuses on platonic love, the kind of love between friends. In the second stanza, the speaker compares the bittersweet nature of memory to the freshness of seeing dead friends returning from the underworld, but also to the sadness of seeing them journeying down there. This image is an implicit classical allusion: in Greek mythology, a man named Orpheus tries to bring his wife Eurydice back from the world of the dead; in doing so, however, he disobeys a command not to look behind him, causing her to vanish forever. The speaker's act of remembering lost friends is analogous to Orpheus's looking back; the *memory* of lost friends serves to highlight the fact that they're *gone*.

Such finality is reinforced by the image in the third stanza of an isolated person on their deathbed. There are no beloved friends around to say comforting words to "dying ears" or gather in front of "dying eyes." Only the birdsong outside can be heard, and the only sight is the sun rising in the window. This is a profoundly sad image, which nevertheless pays tribute to the power of love; isolation from the love of others becomes analogous to a kind of death.

This despair is then tempered by the joyous beginning of the final stanza, which moves onto romantic love. This love the poem describes ecstatically as "dear" and "sweet." Indeed, the speaker remembers the "Dear ... kisses" of a lover or spouse who has died. The adjective "dear" carries two meanings here: firstly, the more familiar idea of *beloved*, but also the secondary meaning of *rare* or *costly*. This implies that a successful, deeply felt love is rare in life, and irretrievably lost after the beloved's death. The tears the speaker cries are thus even more "dear" (valuable), because they are the only physical record of this lost love.

The speaker's intense joy continues even as she discusses *unrequited* love, or love that goes in only one direction. Her tears are now described as "sweet" as kisses "by hopeless fancy feign'd"; this gives readers an image of a lover imitating (feigning) kissing in their imagination ("fancy"), because the person they actually desire is already in a relationship with someone else (their lips are "for others"). Thus the chance to actually *fulfill* these romantic desires is "hopeless."

This word is the first hint that the early joy of the stanza is not without paradox, and from this point onward, the speaker's emotions toward love become more conflicted and unstable. They reach a peak of intensity in the last two lines; the final adjective used to describe her tears is "wild," which indicates her loss of control and a climax to the grieving process. It is appropriate that this extreme emotional instability is related to "first love," traditionally the most intense form of romantic love. This upward progression in intensity then helps explain the hyperbole of the statement that all days past are a form of "Death in life." It is hard to imagine anything but the extreme emotional state of someone wildly in love as being able to elicit such a strong comparison. But the point of the poem seems to be that love is so intense an emotion that it is equal to the force of life itself, therefore the loss or failure of love is as powerful as death.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 6-9
- Lines 11-14
- Lines 16-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,

The first line of the poem establishes the speaker's confusion about her own grief: she is crying, but does not understand exactly why. This tension is reinforced by the fact that the speaker addresses her tears at a distance: she omits the possessive pronoun, refusing to call them "my" tears. This suggests that she is concerned not only with her *personal* sadness, but also with grief in general.

One of the poem's frequent techniques is diacope, the first example of which takes place immediately. The repetition of "tears" is separated by the adjective "idle," which suggests that the speaker is in the process of constantly redefining her grief. This inability to land on a solid assessment of her emotions (which will continue throughout the poem) is hinted at in the word "idle," which carries two similar but ultimately different meanings here:

1. Without a clear *cause*
2. Without a clear *purpose*

These lines also establish that the poem is written in blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter, meaning there are five iambs—poetic feet with a da DUM pattern—per line; more on that in our section on Meter). However, this meter is not rigidly followed, as even this first line contains some variation:

Tears, i- | dle tears, | I know | not what | they mean,

The poem actually begins with a stressed beat (creating a poetic foot called a spondee); the initial stress of "Tears" decisively indicates the poem's main subject. This line also contains two caesuras, setting up a halting rhythm right from the get-go as the speaker tries to work through her emotions.

LINES 2-3

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

The poem's initial vagueness continues throughout the next two lines, when the speaker identifies as the source of her grief as being "some divine despair." Note how "some" is a deliberately obscure adjective. The use of an oxymoron with "divine despair," meanwhile, hints at the speaker's view of memory as a source of paradoxical emotions: "despair," a profound form of sadness, is described as "divine," or heavenly.

This seemingly contradictory relationship is then underscored by the second line's heavy use of alliteration: "depth of some divine despair." This /d/ sound will echo throughout the poem, and in doing so will repeatedly link the speaker's emotions to a sense of loss brought about by "Death" (line 20) and "dying" (14), as well as the loss of a "Dear" (16) and "Deep" (18-19) love.

The third line then tracks the progress of the speaker's tears which "Rise in the heart" before ending up at the eyes. Of course, tears do not in fact originate in the heart; it is however a traditional metaphorical source of deep emotions, especially those related to love. The speaker therefore conflates the *emotion* she is experiencing (grief) with its *physical effects* (tears). This gives the reader a sense of porous boundaries, an idea which recurs throughout the poem as the speaker reflects on the relationship between memory, joy, and grief.

The metrical structure of lines 2-3 is the same as line 1: all of these lines break with iambic pentameter by opening with a stressed syllable (here creating trochees), before falling back into steady iambs:

Tears from | the depth

and

Rise in | the heart

Perhaps this unconventional structure is a way drawing continued attention to the speaker's grief, and of building anticipation before revealing what has *caused* the "tears" of the title and first line.

LINES 4-5

In looking on the happy Autumn-fields,
And thinking of the days that are no more.

In the final two lines of the first stanza the reader finally discovers what prompted the speaker's tears. They had a double cause, in fact: she was "looking on the happy Autumn-fields" while thinking about the past ("the days that are no more"). This response is a bit unusual, because autumn is traditionally a pensive, reflective time: it is associated with the movement from life toward death, from summer to winter, so the fact that it makes the speaker *happy* once more points to the fact that her emotions are confused. Thinking about the passage of time brings the speaker both pleasure and pain.

Her tears are both personal, since it is the speaker specifically who sees the fields, and general, because "the days that are no more" again lacks a personal pronoun. This phrase, which recurs throughout the poem as a kind of refrain, is likely an allusion to Robert Southey's poem "Remembrance"—an example of the speaker's grief being placed into a long literary tradition of lament.

For the first time in the poem, the meter is in strict iambic pentameter; there are no variations or irregularities in these two final lines of the stanza. This might subtly indicate that the

poem has settled into its main themes: the relationship between personal and general griefs, and the conflicting emotions evoked by memories of happy days.

LINES 6-10

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.

The second stanza begins with a simile to illustrate how "fresh" the speaker's tears are. "Fresh" in this context has two meanings: new/different, and pure. The first indicates once again how unexpected the speaker's grief is, whereas the second also implies that because that grief is universal, it is in some sense purer than private mourning.

However, "fresh" is paired with another adjective, "sad", a pattern repeated in stanza 3 (where the speaker's tears are both "sad and strange") and extended in stanza 4 (where they become "dear ... sweet ... deep ... wild"). These pairings are one of the methods used to illustrate the stark *contradictions* in the speaker's emotions.

Another technique the poem uses often is parallelism, seen here with "Fresh as the first ... Sad as the last." This phrasing gives each adjective equal weight: neither happiness at remembering old friends (an action that is compared to their being brought back "up from the underworld"), nor sadness at realizing that they're gone for good (compared to their "sinking" down to the underworld), can win the speaker's heart. She is in unsolvable emotional conflict, in which opposite emotions hold equal place. This is reinforced by the refrain of line 10, where past days are equally "sad" and "fresh."

This stanza also contains the poem's first reference to sunrise ("first beam glittering") and sunset ("the last which reddens"). There are a total of six natural images in the poem: "Autumn-fields" (line 4), sunrise (line 6), sunset (line 8), dawn (line 11), birdsong ("earliest pipe," line 12), and sunrise seen through a casement window (line 14). All except the "Autumn-fields" and birdsong describe either sunrise or sunset (and in fact birdsong is associated with the former). Both sunrise and sunset happen every day, and autumn happens every year. This set of images therefore refers to the idea of recurrence, which ties in with one of the poem's major themes: the relationship between love and death. Like these natural occurrences, love and death are universal: everyone dies, and everyone is born due to love-making. They are also in tune with natural rhythms, just like sunrise, sunset, and autumn. Death usually comes when someone is old, they usually fall in love when they are young, and this happens all over the world.

But the clearest connection in this stanza between the speaker's grief and love/death is in the extended simile, which compares her tears to ships taking beloved friends both up from, and down to, the underworld. This is an allusion to Greek mythology, in which the dead had to cross the River Styx on a boat in order to reach the underworld. Making the return journey, as in lines 6-7, was unusual. One method was the rare ritual of *nekyia*, in which the spirits of the dead were summoned up to be asked advice. It occurs in book 10 of Homer's *Odyssey*, which is possibly what is being referred to in line 7. This is a melancholy scene, hinting that the initial freshness (6-7) of remembering old friends will give way to sadness (8-9) that they cannot return.

Lines 7, 9, and 10 are standard iambic pentameter. However, lines 6 and 8 are slightly unconventional:

Fresh as the first beam glittering on a sail,
...
Sad as the last which reddens over one

In each case, the adjective describing the speaker's tears is the first syllable of the line and is stressed, highlighting its importance. Line 6 is the most unusual line yet, with three stresses in a row appearing in the middle of the line. This accelerating emphasis imitates the speaker's quickening heart and unstable emotions, which then slow on line 8 as she becomes "sad" and the line returns to its steady beat, ending with three iambs (which red- | dens o- | ver one).

LINES 11-13

Ah, sad and strange as in dark summer dawns
The earliest pipe of half-awaken'd birds
To dying ears,

The third stanza begins with another pair of adjectives describing the speaker's tears, and which are used as a jumping off point for an extended simile. They are "sad and strange," a pair of words whose sleepy sibilance echoes the fact that the simile paints a picture of early "summer dawns," when most people are still in bed.

The strangeness of the speaker's grief is sustained by the imagery in these lines. "Dark summer dawns" is almost an oxymoron: dawn is the time when the sun rises, and thus when darkness is swept *away*, especially so in summer. Therefore perhaps "dark" here is being used in a different sense: unhappy/unpleasant, or even mysterious/obscure. The second would suit the "strange" imagery of this stanza, while the first is appropriate given that this imagery focuses on an unidentified "dying" character.

In line 13 the speaker directly refers to death for the first time, creating something of an ironic contrast with the "earliest pipe of half-awaken'd birds": traditionally birdsong is representative of new *life*, not death. But the fact that the birds are described as "half-awaken'd" draws a close comparison between them and the owner of the "dying ears," because the state of being close to death, with your senses fading, is similar to that of

being half-awake, when your senses are also not working fully.

Tennyson wrote the poem after a visit to the picturesque but destitute Tintern Abbey, near to where his dear friend Arthur Hallam was buried. Perhaps Hallam was the inspiration behind the "dying" figure in this stanza, and the poem's preoccupation with death more generally, though it is not possible to say for sure.

LINES 13-15

when unto dying eyes
The casement slowly grows a glimmering square;
So sad, so strange, the days that are no more.

Line 13 is split in two by a caesura, which indicates the start of the second part of the stanza's extended simile. The speaker now changes focus from the sounds that "dying ears" can *hear* to what "dying eyes" can *see* (the repetition of "dying" is also another example of diacope). The only sight that the "dying eyes" are able to see is the "glimmering square" of the casement window, which "slowly grows."

Given that it is dawn, this growing light must be sunrise, which, again, is traditionally associated with birdsong, joy, and liveliness. This two-parted simile is yet another instance of the poem combining two equally important yet conflicting ideas. This time the poem uses the imagery within a simile to make the point that the speaker's mind is divided in two between joy at remembering happy things, and sadness at the fact that they're in the past.

The sibilance in line 14 ("casement slowly grows a glimmering square") echoes that of "sad and strange" and evokes sleep, perhaps because the "dying" character is lying in their deathbed. The image of the "glimmering square" may be a further reference to death, since many accounts of near-death experiences record the experience of moving towards a bright light.

There is another irony at play here however, as death is also traditionally associated with darkness. Yet in both this simile and the one in stanza 2, Tennyson uses images containing *light* to refer to death: "the first beam glittering ... the last which reddens." He may have done this because in each case, the light being described is a sort of threshold or boundary between two states: sunrise and sunset separate night and day. This idea is reinforced by the choice to have the "dying" character see the sunrise through a "casement"; windows are another kind of boundary, between inside and outside. The choice to set the poem during "Autumn" is also telling: autumn is the boundary between summer and winter. The use of oxymoron and paradox throughout the poem also echos this idea of a boundary between two different states. And, of course, the boundary to which all of these refer is the *ultimate* boundary, between life and death, past and present.

LINES 16-18

Dear as remember'd kisses after death,
And sweet as those by hopeless fancy feign'd
On lips that are for others;

The final stanza begins as the previous two have: with an adjective describing the speaker's tears, and by extension, her grief: "dear." In this context "dear" has several meanings: beloved, but also rare/costly. This implies that her "remember'd kisses" are rare, because they were part of a successful, deeply felt love. Such love, the main theme of this stanza, is difficult to find, hence why the speaker values her memory of it so highly even after the "death" of her lover.

The alliteration on the /d/ sound begun line 2 reappears in this stanza, beginning with line 16: "dear ... death." The word "dear" is not typically associated with death, which is in a way its opposite: hated yet universal. Once again, then, the poem pairs two words with opposing associations, stressing the speaker's paradoxical emotions towards the past.

The tears are not only "dear," but also "sweet." The similes for "dear" and "sweet," although both related to love, feature very different *types* of love. The love in line 16 was successful: the "kisses" are "remember'd," meaning they must have happened, whereas the love in lines 17-18 is unrequited. "Hopeless fancy feign'd" refers to the speaker imagining being able to kiss someone whom she loves, but who is in a relationship with someone else: their lips are "for others." Sibilance ("sweet ... hopeless ... lips ... others") and alliteration on the /f/ sound in "fancy feign'd" play an important role in lines 17-18. As in stanza 3, sibilance here evokes sleepiness, which is appropriate given that the speaker is daydreaming about kissing. It is also a melancholy sound, which mirrors the emotions of someone hopelessly in love. Alliteration on the soft, gentle /f/ sound doesn't feel all that different from sibilance, falling into the same sad, sleepy pattern.

As with lines 3 and 13, which are also the third lines of their respective stanzas, line 18 is divided by a caesura. In each case, this is the halfway point of the stanza, and is yet another way that the poem tries to balance opposing ideas to indicate the barrier between past and present, dead and alive, and between the speaker's conflicting emotions of happiness and sadness (her "divine despair").

The first syllable of line 16 is stressed, as with line 6. In both, the stressed syllable is an adjective describing the speaker's tears. ("Fresh as" in line 6 and "Dear as" in line 16). "Dear" also looks forward to "deep" in line 19, connected not only by alliteration, but also by the fact that they interrupt the iambic pentameter at the very beginning of the line (that is, "Deep as" is another trochee). These interrupted rhythms, especially in line 19, indicate the speaker's growing emotional intensity.

LINES 18-20

deep as love,
Deep as first love, and wild with all regret;
O Death in Life, the days that are no more!

After the caesura in line 18 the poem builds to its climax. Two new adjectives are introduced to describe the speaker's tears ("deep" and "wild"), meaning this stanza has a total of four adjectives to describe the speaker's sadness, whereas stanzas 2 and 3 each had two. The choice of "deep" and "wild," which are the most intense emotions mentioned in the poem, indicates the speaker's increasingly intense state of mind.

Diacope is used again in lines 18-19 ("deep as love, / deep as first love"), for a similar purpose as in line 1. The speaker is struggling in her more and more emotional state to find a suitable simile for the depth of her grief: at first she says it is "deep as love," but then changes this to "deep as *first* love." This indicates that her emotions remain in a conflict she is unable to settle, just as in line 1, where diacope indicates that she constantly reassesses her grief.

Whereas the similes at the beginning of the stanza were personal (they referred to intimate love affairs), the similes in these lines become more universal, leading the reader up to the conclusion, in which a general statement about memory itself is made. "Deep as love" is a precursor to this general statement. The speaker is not saying that her tears are as deep as her *own* love affairs, but as deep as love *itself*. She goes on to specify that they are "deep as first love," traditionally the most intense form of love, and a near-universal experience. The second half of line 19, "wild with all regret," is not a simile. The speaker has run out of comparisons and is now assessing her emotions directly: she is "wild with all regret." Note how once more this is a universalizing statement: it's not her *own* personal regret that drives her wild with grief, it is "*all* regret."

The final refrain crystallizes the emotions felt in the previous two (optimism and sadness in stanza 2, sadness and discomfort in stanza 3). The speaker ends her reflection, her "thinking," with a "wild" exclamation: "the days that are no more" are a form of "Death in Life." This arguable hyperbole is expressed not only through the boldness of the statement itself but also by the use of the exclamatory "O" at the start of the line. There is a previous exclamation in line 11, "Ah," however this seems far more relaxed than the one in line 20, perhaps because it sounds like a yawn or sigh taken when someone is settling down to sleep. "O" is typically used in poetry of this and earlier periods to indicate tragic grief, the opposite of restfulness. Here it seems defiant: the speaker stands up to death and the past, her words a proof against their power to take away those she loves. "O" also imitates the sound of orgasm, the source of new life and therefore another defiance of death.

Metrically the final lines are standard iambic pentameter, except for line 19, which has six stressed syllables instead of the standard five:

Deep as first love, and wild with all regret

This extra stressed syllable may be there to indicate the increasing intensity of the speaker's emotions, as well as the move towards universality in the phrase "wild with all regret."

SYMBOLS

SUNRISE AND SUNSET

Sunrise and sunset separate night from day, and light from darkness: they each form a sort of boundary. In "Tears, Idle Tears," both sunrise and sunset are fittingly associated with the boundary between life and death, and between the present and the past.

The logic behind this association is the fact that death, in the poem, is analogous to darkness, and life to light. In lines 6-7, the "first beam" of sunrise falls on a ship bringing up friends "from the underworld." In returning from death, the crew of this ship imitates the action of sunrise, which dispels the darkness of the night. This first reference to sunrise is filled with "fresh" optimism. However the poem's next reference to it, in lines 11 and 14, is far more pessimistic. Instead of dispelling the darkness of death, the "dawn" *itself* is now "dark." This stanza also imagines a tragic figure "dying" without friends or loved ones, whom sunrise cannot save. Not only that, but dawn itself has become associated with death: in line 14 the "slowly glimmering square" that the dying figure sees through his casement window may be a reference to the bright light reported by those who have had near-death experiences. One might also note the fact that it is a "square," which is an abstract shape, not something definite like the ships in stanza 2 or the "half-awaken'd birds" heard in line 12. Perhaps this is because death is itself abstract: no one knows what happens when you die.

The pessimism of the sunrise symbolism in stanza 3 is prompted by the intervention of sunset earlier in the poem, in line 8. Sunset, which sees the day turn to night, represents the movement from life to death. It is "sad," an emotion that carries into stanza 3, and mixes with the "fresh" optimism to create an ambiguous "strange" feeling in the speaker's heart. This coming together of emotions usually considered opposites represents the speaker's confusion of the boundaries between past and present, as well as between life and death. Throughout the poem she is remembering, an action that temporarily revives the past, including dead friends; "Death in Life" is thus a paradox demonstrating the confusion of the boundaries represented by sunrise and sunset.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** " Fresh as the first beam glittering on a sail,"
- **Line 8:** "Sad as the last which reddens over one"
- **Line 11:** "dark summer dawns"
- **Line 14:** "slowly grows a glimmering square;"

POETIC DEVICES

REFRAIN

The refrain of "Tears, Idle Tears" changes slightly between each stanza, though it is constantly focused on "the days that are no more" (or, in other words, the past). The first refrain, in line 5, prompts the reflections that make up the next two stanzas, because it is the start of the speaker's "thinking." The rest of the poem then goes on to detail these thoughts—to elaborate on what the speaker is actually "thinking" about.

The second refrain, in line 10, then summarizes the speaker's emotions towards the past at this stage of the poem: the past is both "sad" and "fresh." These two adjectives are used to describe contradictory ideas, hinting at the speaker's paradoxical emotions (which will heighten as the poem moves through each refrain).

The next time the refrain appears, in line 15, the speaker swaps in the word "strange" for "fresh." This implies that not much progress has been made towards resolving the speaker's contradictory assessment of the past. In fact, her stance is getting ever stranger, even less logical or coherent.

The final refrain then sums up the speaker's mindset in a paradox: "O Death in Life, the days that are no more!" Instead of resolving her contradictory attitude, the speaker exclaims that the past itself is a paradox when accessed through memories, ending the poem at a sort of midpoint between joy and sadness.

Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "And thinking of the days that are no more."
- **Line 10:** "So sad, so fresh, the days that are no more."
- **Line 15:** "So sad, so strange, the days that are no more."
- **Line 20:** "O Death in Life, the days that are no more!"

ALLITERATION

The poem's use of alliteration revolves, in large part, around three sounds: /d/, /f/, and /s/. The /d/ alliteration first appears in line 2 in combination with oxymoron ("**d**ivine **d**espair"). In this instance, the alliteration creates a connection between two seemingly contradictory words, indicating the speaker's paradoxical emotions (she is extremely sad, but this sadness somehow feels heavenly, or like a gift from god).

The /d/ sound then echoes throughout the poem. This is not always *technically* alliteration, given that some of these words are spaced quite far apart, but nevertheless the /d/ sound still rings out quite clearly to the reader given the sheer number of times it crops up. Take, for instance, the refrain of the poem, which repeats the /d/ sound in the phrase "the **d**ays that are no more." This shared /d/ sound connects the past (those "days") to the speaker's "divine despair."

Some of the reasons why the past *causes* such confused emotions for the speaker also appear in subsequent examples of the /d/ sound. For one thing, the past—those "Days that are no more"—is repeatedly connected via alliteration to "**d**eath" (lines 16 and 20) and "**d**ying" (lines 13 and 16), indicating the importance of this idea—that memory is a form of "**D**eath in life"—for the speaker's "divine despair."

Although death is normally associated with negative emotions, the poem seeks to balance joy and sadness equally, hence the other uses of the /d/ sound in "**d**ear" (line 16) and "**d**eep" (lines 17-18), which relate to positive descriptions of profound love. But the emotional paradox the speaker grapples with is perhaps best expressed by the alliteration in line 11, with "**d**ark summer **d**awns." Dawn, especially in summer is usually light, not dark, but Tennyson's alliterative paradox associates two opposing ideas in order to mimic the speaker's split mind.

The second important example of alliteration in the poem is on the /f/ sound. There are only two examples, both of which describe imagined scenes. In lines 6-7, the speaker is comparing the freshness of her tears to sunlight glinting off a ship bringing dead friends up from the underworld, and in line 17 she fantasizes about kissing someone already betrothed to another. The /f/ sound is sleepy, and may be intended to imitate gentle snoring; hence why it is used when the speaker describes imaginary scenes: it is as if she were dreaming.

Finally, the poem repeatedly returns to /s/ sounds. The /s/ sound is soft, gentle, hushed; as such, its usage throughout the poem keeps the tone quiet and reflective, almost as if the speaker is whispering her bewildered refrain about how the past is "**s**o **s**ad," "**s**o fresh," and "**s**o **s**trange." We talk about this more in our entry on sibilance.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "T," "t," "kn," "n"
- **Line 2:** "d," "d," "d"
- **Line 6:** "F," "f"
- **Line 7:** "fr," "fr"
- **Line 10:** "S," "s," "s"
- **Line 11:** "s," "s," "d," "s," "d"
- **Line 13:** "d," "d"
- **Line 14:** "g," "g," "s"
- **Line 15:** "S," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 16:** "D," "d"

- **Line 17:** “f,” “f”
- **Line 18:** “l,” “d,” “l”
- **Line 19:** “D,” “l,” “w,” “w”
- **Line 20:** “D,” “d”

SIBILANCE

A specific sub-type of consonance, which is particularly prominent in this poem, is sibilance. The first stanza features only scattered examples, which on their own are probably too disconnected to *strictly* be called sibilance. However when re-read in the context of the rest of the poem, which contains an abundance, they can be seen as part of a pattern of /s/, /sh/, and /z/ sounds throughout the poem.

Stanza 2 offers the first definite examples of sibilance, appearing in nearly every line. This section of the poem is centered around images on sunset and sunrise (the "first" and "last" beams), times when people typically wake up or go to bed. Both dawn and dusk can be thought of as a kind of boundary between waking and sleeping, and the abundance of sibilance adds to the gentle, sleepy tone (especially in combination with the /f/ and /v/ consonance throughout this stanza). The imagery in this stanza is reflective and dream-like, so it is appropriate that the poem uses aural effects to reference sleep.

This association between sibilance and sleep heightens in stanza 3. It is set at early dawn, when "half-awaken'd birds" are singing their first songs. The imagery is similarly dream-like, but sibilance here has an additional meaning: the stanza features a "dying" figure, and since sleep has a literary history of being compared to death, the sibilance here gains this new, perhaps more sinister association.

The final stanza then centers around romantic love. The deathly associations of stanza 3 temporarily become more positive, with the word "sweet" following "kisses." however, the rest of this sibilant phrase mixes joy with more bittersweet emotions, because this sweetness describes "hopeless" love. The stanza ends with a refrain containing much fewer sibilants than in stanzas 2 and 3, indicating perhaps that the speaker has woken from her dream-like revery, and has settled on a finalizing interpretation of her grief, instead of just sighing about how "sad," "fresh" and "strange" it all is.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** “sh,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 7:** “s,” “s”
- **Line 8:** “S,” “s,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 10:** “S,” “s,” “s,” “sh”
- **Line 11:** “s,” “s,” “s,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 14:** “s,” “s,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 15:** “S,” “s,” “s,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 16:** “ss”
- **Line 17:** “s,” “s,” “s,” “ss,” “c”

ALLUSION

The poem is filled with literary allusions, beginning in the very first line. "Idle tears," meaning useless/purposeless/causeless tears, is perhaps a reference to Virgil's *Aeneid*. Book 4, line 449, in Latin this reads: "mens immota manet, lacrimae volvuntur inanes." Translated, this means "his mind stands steadfast, empty tears roll down." Tennyson himself used the same phrase in his 1833 narrative poem *The Miller's Daughter*: “Love is made a vague regret. / Eyes with idle tears are wet” (210-11), demonstrating his preoccupation with this longstanding idea of mysterious sadness. This is part of the poem's special type of grief, which is not personal and individual, but rather more universal; allusion places the speaker's thoughts in a long tradition of similar ways of thinking.

Subtler allusions to Virgil occur in the second stanza. The simile about ships traveling freely up to and down from the underworld again recalls *The Aeneid*—specifically when the hero Aeneas goes by ship to a mysterious island, to access a gate to the underworld in order to travel there and seek advice from his dead father Anchises. This process was known as *katabasis*; however a rarer classical ritual known as *nekyia* is actually closer to what is happening in lines 6-7. In this ritual, which takes place in Homer's *Odyssey* book 10, friends are summoned up from the underworld for advice, rather than the hero traveling down, as in *katabasis*. In the *Odyssey* this scene is a sad one, as Odysseus meets the ghosts of his dead friends, many of whom express despair at the state of the underworld, which is dull and drab in comparison to the world above. By alluding to Homer, Tennyson anticipates the sadness in line 8, even as he describes what at first sight is a joyful scene.

The last literary allusion is not a classical one. It occurs in every refrain, where the crucial phrase "the days that are no more" appears. This phrase is from the concluding lines of the first and last stanzas of Robert Southey's "Remembrance" (1823), which is about how no matter what age a person is, they always dwell on their regrets about the past, instead of concentrating on what is good about the present. Tennyson gives his poem a similarly melancholy tone, and uses Southey's argument as a starting point for his reflections about the frustrating contradictions of remembering the past.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “idle tears,”
- **Line 5:** “the days that are no more.”
- **Lines 6-9:** “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;”

- **Line 10:** " the days that are no more."
- **Line 15:** " the days that are no more."
- **Line 20:** "the days that are no more!"

PARADOX

Paradox appears three times in the poem, but the idea of two contradictory ideas being combined is vital to the poem as a whole. The first concise example of paradox is really an oxymoron. In line 2, "divine despair" is a paradox because "divine" means heavenly, whereas "despair" refers to the opposite, an extremely deep sadness. By combining two words with opposite meanings, Tennyson stresses the fact that this poem is interested in unsettled states of mind, where conflicting emotions hold equal space at the same time.

"Dark summer dawns" is then another example; usually dawn, especially in summer, is bright, so to have described it as dark is seemingly contradictory. However, Tennyson does this in order to highlight that the boundary between night and day that dawn represents (as do both sunrise and sunset, referenced in lines 6 and 8), is not solid. Night and day, light and dark, joy and grief, past and present, life and death, are not each completely opposed but actually combined throughout the poem, just as in a paradox.

Why this is the case is made clear in line 20; "O Death in Life, the days that are no more!" This could mean two things: on the one hand the past ("the days that are no more") is as lost as the dead; but on the other, death is contained "in Life," meaning that just like sunrise enlightens the night, memory can be used to enlighten the past. This gives the poem a conclusion that is neither entirely joyful nor sad, but a mix of both, because although the past is granted "fresh" life in the speaker's mind through her memories, those memories themselves are a reminder that it is "no more."

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "divine despair"
- **Line 11:** "dark summer dawns"
- **Line 20:** "O Death in Life"

ASSONANCE

Although "Tears, Idle Tears" doesn't rhyme, its abundant use of assonance means that it still feels very lyrical. A common vowel sound is the flat /eh/ of "despair," "depth," and "death." All these words have negative connotations, associating this sound with the "despair" brought about when the speaker thinks about "dead" friends and lovers.

In the first line, the long /i/ assonance between "idle" and "I" immediately establishes a deep connection between the speaker and her seemingly purposeless tears. Later, assonance seems to simply add a sense of musicality to the speaker's recollections. Take lines 7 and 8:

> That brings our friends up from the underworld,
> Sad as the last ...

The short /uh/ vowel sounds in "up from the underworld" gives the phrase a sort of rising, bouncy quality—which is fitting, given that it describes the way that the speaker's *memories* of her loved ones seem to bring those people back to life, at least in her mind. The nasally /ah/ of "Sad as the last" in the next line then draws a sonic connection between sadness and the "last" sunbeam—that is, between the speaker's despair and the awareness that her dead loved ones have left her for good.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "ea," "i," "ea," "I," "ea"
- **Line 2:** "ea," "e," "e"
- **Line 7:** "u," "o," "u"
- **Line 8:** "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 9:** "i," "i"
- **Line 13:** "y," "y," "eye"
- **Line 14:** "o," "o"
- **Line 15:** "a," "a"
- **Line 16:** "e," "e," "ea"
- **Line 17:** "o," "o"
- **Line 19:** "e"
- **Line 20:** "ea"

SIMILE

The second and third stanzas consist entirely of extended similes (except for the refrain). In stanza 2, the speaker says that her tears are both "fresh" and "sad," and supplies a simile for each adjective. These similes are in fact opposites: the simile used to show how "fresh" her tears are pictures *sunrise* glinting off a ship bringing friends *up* from the underworld, whereas the simile showing how "sad" they are pictures *sunset* glimmering off a ship taking friends *down* to the underworld. The poem argues that memory is paradoxical and the choice to compare the speaker's emotions to two images that are the complete opposite of one another is an example of this paradox in action. This stanza also uses parallelism to further emphasize this point: "Fresh as the first ... sad as the last," where "first" and "last" hold the *same* position in the phrase, but have *opposite* meanings.

In stanza 3 the adjectives "sad and strange" are both mentioned in the first line, indicating that the speaker's contradictory emotions are getting closer and closer (because in stanza 2 "fresh" and "sad" were separated by a line). As in the previous stanza, the imagery here pictures a deathly scene. An anonymous figure on their deathbed alone, without any friends, is able to hear birdsong and see a "glimmering square" of light. This light is sunrise again, as in line 6, however this time it is

described as "sad and strange" instead of "fresh."

The final stanza has four similes, all of which center around love: "remember'd kisses after death" (16); kisses imagined by "hopeless fancy" (17); "love" itself (18); and finally "first love" (19). The first two are examples of very different types of love: in line 16 the speaker *remembers* kisses that actually happened, meaning she must have been in a loving relationship, whereas in line 17 she *imagines* kisses that she wishes had happened, but didn't, because the person she wanted to kiss was betrothed to someone else (their "lips ... are for others"). Again the poem uses two contradictory similes to demonstrate the speaker's divided mind. The final two similes are much more abstract: they don't refer to any specific lover, but to the concepts of "love" and "first love." This shows that the poem is moving from personal statements about love and memory, to more general and universal ideas as it comes to its climax in the final refrain.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- Lines 6-9
- Lines 11-14
- Lines 16-19

CONSONANCE

In addition to the /d/, /f/, and /s/ sounds already covered in our alliteration entry, there are further examples of consonance in this poem. Again, overall, this consonance adds to the poem's sense of lyricism and musicality in the absence of a regular rhyme scheme. The consonance also often reflects the lines' thematic content. In the first line, for example, the /n/ sounds in "know not ... mean" mimic the speaker's inability to understand her own grief; they sound like dull, repetitive banging, like a miner in search of gold who finds only granite.

Throughout all four stanzas the /th/ sound is also repeated, in both hard (as in the) and soft (as in death) varieties. In many cases this is just because the definite article "the" is required, so one cannot attribute too much meaning here. However Tennyson often plays the hard /th/ off against softer pronunciations, as in lines 2, 3 and 20: "the depth;" "gather to the eyes"; "O Death in Life, the days." This could be another example of the poem balancing opposites in order to represent the speaker's divided mind, which moves between despair and joy as the poem moves between soft and hard pronunciations.

Another notable example of consonance that recurs throughout the poem is the /l/ sound, which pops up clearly in lines 9, 12, 14, and 19. This is a mournful sound often associated with lament, appropriate to the mournful tone and subject matter of the poem. Its lilting tone is musical, emphasizing the fact that "Tears, Idle Tears" is sung within the narrative poem *The Princess*.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "T," "rs," "t," "rs," "kn," "n," "n"
- **Line 2:** "r," "r," "th," "d," "th," "d," "d," "r"
- **Line 3:** "R," "th," "r," "th," "r," "th"
- **Line 6:** "Fr," "f," "r," "r"
- **Line 7:** "r," "s," "fr," "s," "fr," "d," "r," "r," "d"
- **Line 8:** "S," "d," "s," "dd"
- **Line 9:** "s," "s," "w," "ll," "w," "l," "v," "l," "v"
- **Line 10:** "S," "s," "d," "s," "d"
- **Line 11:** "s," "s," "d," "s," "d"
- **Line 12:** "l," "s," "l," "d," "d"
- **Line 13:** "d," "d"
- **Line 14:** "c," "s," "s," "l," "w," "g," "w," "g," "l," "s," "q"
- **Line 15:** "S," "s," "d," "s," "s," "d"
- **Line 16:** "D," "r," "r," "m," "m," "r," "d," "ss," "r," "d"
- **Line 17:** "s," "s," "s," "l," "ss," "f," "n," "c," "f," "n"
- **Line 18:** "l," "d," "l"
- **Line 19:** "D," "l," "d," "w," "l," "d," "w," "ll"
- **Line 20:** "D," "th," "L," "f," "th," "d"

CAESURA

Every stanza of "Tears, Idle Tears" contains caesuras, which, combined with the fact that 14 of the poem's 20 lines are end-stopped, serves to give the poem a slow, deliberate rhythm. This mimics the setting of the poem, which is not in any distinctive location, but rather within the speaker's mind as it flits between memories, hopes, regrets, and fantasies. The poem itself is an example of *thinking in progress*, and it is very clear that this speaker is a gradual thinker, puzzled by simple things, who prefers to work them out slowly rather than to come instinctively to a rapid conclusion.

That said, caesuras do not totally saturate the poem: 11 out of 20 lines lack one, which almost makes a 1:1 equivalence between lines with and without these pauses. Perhaps this is once again a method to mimic the speaker's split mind, but in terms of the poem's rhythm it means that when reading, it never runs at a single speed. It flows smoothly at some points, such as in lines 4 to 9, where there are no caesuras, and slows down at other points, such as in the last three lines, which are broken up by three caesuras in a row. The reader goes along with the speaker in moving flexibly between thoughts and feelings, between the speaker's simultaneous joy and sorrow.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** ", " ", "
- **Line 3:** ", "
- **Line 10:** ", " ", "
- **Line 11:** ", "
- **Line 13:** ", "
- **Line 15:** ", " ", "
- **Line 18:** "; "

- **Line 19:** “, ”
- **Line 20:** “, ”

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment plays a role alongside the poem's use of end-stopping and caesura. Whereas the latter two break up and slow down the rhythm of the poem, enjambment lets it flow. In lines 2-3 as the speaker describes her "divine despair" rising "in the heart" and becoming tears that "gather to the eyes," enjambment mimics the ease with which grief produces tears, and the fluidity of these tears as they fall down her cheeks.

In lines 8-9 enjambment is once again used in descriptions of a fluid process; this time it's the sunset that "sinks ... below the verge." Both sunset and sunrise happen gradually every day, so gradually and so fluidly that one might not even notice them, in fact. These lines are also part of a simile that evokes death, another natural process, which in this image is presented as slow rather than sudden.

Stanza 3 is the only stanza containing multiple uses of enjambment. This is unsurprising given that this is where the idea that thresholds between different states (life/death, memory/loss, joy/grief) are not as solid as they seem, is explored in the most detail. The end of a line is also a threshold, so overstepping it through enjambment is a formal way to show that boundaries are not absolute. This is a "summer" dawn, yet it is "dark"; the figure in this stanza is at the *end* of their life, yet hears birds at the *beginning* of the day; by "dying" this person is entering a state of darkness, yet sees "light."

One could argue something similar for the single use of enjambment in the last stanza: love is the ultimate dissolving of a boundary: two different people come together, negating their differences by sexual and emotional contact.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** “despair / Rise”
- **Lines 8-9:** “one / That”
- **Lines 11-12:** “dawns / The”
- **Lines 12-13:** “birds / To”
- **Lines 13-14:** “eyes / The”
- **Lines 17-18:** “feign'd / On”

DIACOPE

Diacope is the main type of repetition used in the poem. It derives from an Ancient Greek word meaning "cut in two," which helps to explain why Tennyson chose to use so much in this particular poem. The speaker is constantly torn between opposing states of mind: joy at remembering old friends, sadness at the fact that they're lost. Diacope is used to represent this cutting in two.

In lines 1-2, diacope appears as the speaker questions the *source* of her tears. The repetition of the word "tears" serves to demonstrate the fact that she cannot let them be without constantly returning to the problem of *why* she's crying. The next appearance of diacope is in the second refrain (line 10), and recurs once more in the third refrain (line 15). This is the clearest instance of the speaker's thoughts being "cut in two": she cannot decide between whether her tears are "sad" or "fresh," so instead settles on their being both at once. By line 15 she has settled on a far more ambiguous adjective than before, "strange," instead of clarifying her conflicted thoughts and emotions.

Line 13 then sees the repetition of the word "dying," which is a major source of the speaker's grief. She speaks in stanza 2 about dead friends, and in stanza 4 about dead lovers, yet she is unable to allow her grief to stand alone: it is always mixed with more positive emotions such as "fresh" joy, and "sweet" affection. In lines 18-19 there is a double instance of diacope: both the words "deep" and "love" are repeated within a short space. This shows how the speaker continues to tie herself in paradoxical knots over her emotions, a process that climaxes in the out and out paradox of the last line "O Death in Life."

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “Tears,” “tears”
- **Line 2:** “Tears”
- **Line 10:** “So,” “sad,” “so”
- **Line 11:** “sad”
- **Line 13:** “dying,” “dying”
- **Line 15:** “So,” “so”
- **Line 18:** “deep as love”
- **Line 19:** “Deep as,” “love”

PARALLELISM

There are two instances of parallelism in the poem, compressed within four lines and containing two similes that illustrate opposite emotions and opposite processes. The speaker's tears are described as both "Fresh as the first beam" (meaning fresh as sunrise) and "Sad as the last" (meaning sad as sunset) in an image picturing boats going in opposite directions; one "That brings our friends up from the underworld," another "That sinks with all we love below the verge."

By placing sadness and freshness in the same position at the start of lines 6 and 8 respectively, Tennyson gives each adjective equal weight. Neither happiness at remembering old friends, nor sadness at realizing that they're gone for good, can win the speaker's heart. She is in unsolvable emotional conflict, in which opposite emotions hold equal place. This paradox is reinforced by the second instance of parallelism in lines 7 and 9, where the verbs describing the movement of the ships are in the same position as one another in each line. The poem

refuses to settle on one image or the other, but holds both in balance.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "Fresh as the first beam glittering on a sail, / That brings our friends up from the underworld,"
- **Lines 8-9:** "Sad as the last which reddens over one / That sinks with all we love below the verge;"

VOCABULARY

Idle (Line 1) - "Idle" has two meanings here: without a clear *purpose*, and without a clear *cause*. This establishes the fact that the speaker cannot settle on one interpretation of her grief.

Divine despair (Line 2) - An oxymoron: "divine" means heavenly, and so is almost always used in an extremely positive sense, whereas "despair" is a feeling of absolute sadness or depression, and so is almost always used in a negative sense.

Fresh (Line 6, Line 10) - "Fresh" here roughly means *new*, and indicates more how unexpected the speaker's grief is. Freshness is normally used positively: fresh food is good food, for example, so its use in stanza 2 has positive connotations.

First beam (Line 6) - The first ray of sunlight.

Pipe (Line 12) - Birdsong. The fact that it's the "earliest pipe" means it is the first birdsong of the day, which takes place at dawn.

Casement (Line 14) - A window attached to its frame by hinges at the sides.

Dear (Line 16) - Beloved, but also rare/costly. This implies that the speaker's "remember'd kisses" are rare, because they were part of a successful, deeply felt love. Such love is difficult to find, hence why the speaker values her memory of it so highly.

Fancy (Line 17) - Imagination, as well as a tentative idea or belief. Both are appropriate in the context, where the speaker imagines kissing somebody she desires, but also knows that this desire is "hopeless" because this person is already betrothed to someone else.

Feign'd (Line 17) - Pretended. The speaker compares her tears to the sweetness of using her imagination to pretend to kiss someone she has no chance of getting with.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Tears, Idle Tears" is an elegy, however it is not written according to any particular form. It has four stanzas of five lines each, making them quintains, each of which ends with a variation on the poem's refrain.

Because the poem does not follow any strict form, Tennyson is not obliged to follow any traditions in terms of how he organizes the poem (as he would be in a sonnet, for instance). However, by using the same length stanza four times in a row he is able to return again and again to the same ideas, subtly reassessing them in each new stanza. The whole poem is an interpretation of the speaker's "tears" from line 1, and the repetition of the quintain shows that even in focusing on this limited subject matter, there are a huge range of emotions that can emerge.

METER

"Tears, Idle Tears" is written in blank verse, meaning it is made up of unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter: five poetic feet per line, each of which follows an unstressed stressed pattern of accented syllables. This is considered the natural rhythm of English speech, making it an appropriate meter for a poem in which the speaker talks to herself. Its gentle, familiar rhythms could also be said to be sleepy, echoing the dreamlike quality of the imagery in stanzas 2 and 3.

However there are several lines where the meter varies, including the very first, where the stress falls on both the first syllable and the second, creating a spondee:

> Tears, i- | dle tears, | I know | not what | they mean,

This immediately establishes the speaker's grief as the focus of the poem. Depending on how you read it, though, it is also possible to interpret the first foot as a trochee: "Tears i- | dle tears"—the lack of stress on "idle" mimicking the sense of purposelessness that its definition conveys. Several other lines also have the stress falling on the first syllable, again creating trochees:

Line 6:

> Fresh as the first beam glittering on a sail

Line 8:

> Sad as the last which reddens over one

Line 16:

> Dear as remember'd kisses after death,

Line 19:

> Deep as first love, and wild with all regret;

In each case the initial stressed syllable is an adjective describing the speaker's tears, highlighting the importance of the fact that she constantly reconsiders how best to define her

grief. Within these lines there are further, more radical changes to the meter. Line 6 is the most unusual, with its triple stresses on "first beam glittering." This accelerating rhythm imitates the speaker's quickening heart and unstable emotions, which then slow on line 8 as she becomes "sad" and the meter returns to its regular pattern, ending with three iambs.

Line 19 also stands out. Its structure is as follows: trochee, spondee, iamb, iamb, iamb:

Deep as | first love, | and wild | with all | regret;

The metrical disruption that takes place before the caesura mimics the emotional disruption of "first love," traditionally considered the most intense and unpredictable form of romantic love.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem does not have a rhyme scheme, relying instead on assonance and alliteration to create a sense of lyricism and melody effects. There is, however, one example of an internal rhyme: "Rise" and "eyes" in line 3. Perhaps Tennyson chose to include the one and only rhyme so early in the poem in order to frustrate the reader's expectations; one might expect the poem to answer the query posed in the first line: what do these tears mean? But it doesn't, just as one might expect further instances of rhyme after this early example, but there aren't.

SPEAKER

Taken on its own, the poem does not have a defined speaker; there are no indications of the speaker's age, gender, or occupation. This helps the poem's discussion of memory and grief feel universal and relatable.

It is a different story, however, if readers understand the poem in context. Because "Tears, Idle Tears" originally appeared embedded within Tennyson's narrative poem *The Princess*, its speaker has a definitive identity. She is a maid in the court of Princess Ida, who comes into a dome where the narrator and Ida are resting, in order to sing to them. Her song is the poem, an account of her grief about lost friends, and the mixed happiness and sadness she feels when thinking about the past.

She is confused over the source of her tears, and goes on to detail several conflicting emotions: happiness at the idea of friends returning from the dead, sadness at their dying, "dear ... deep" love, and regret. She ends by considering the past itself (as distinct from her own personal history) a form of "Death in Life," a paradox that could be interpreted both optimistically and pessimistically: on the one hand the past is as lost as the dead, but on the other, death is contained "in Life," meaning that just like sunrise enlightens the night, memory can be used to enlighten the past.

SETTING

"Tears, Idle Tears" does not take place in a particular location or at a particular time. This helps its ideas about sadness and memory feel universal, like they could apply to a number of circumstances.

Zooming out to the broader context of Tennyson's *The Princess*, the maid sings this poem in a pleasure-dome where the main characters are relaxing. This is not mentioned in the poem *itself*, however, where the only definitive setting is the "happy Autumn-fields" at which the speaker is looking. Other settings, including a vague view of ships sailing the sea in stanza 2, and a similarly vague room with a casement window in stanza 3, are all embedded within similes, and are therefore likely to be either imaginary or memories. The setting for the poem, then, could be considered to be the speaker's mind.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) was one of the most famous British Victorian poets and served as England's Poet Laureate from 1850 until his death. "Tears, Idle Tears" is a lyric elegy, often referred to as a song because it was originally published as part of the narrative poem *The Princess* (1847). This work tells the story of Princess Ida, who founds a women's university that excludes men. It is narrated by an unnamed prince who was betrothed to Ida when they were children, and who sneaks into the university in disguise in order to win her love, eventually succeeding.

The song itself is performed by a maid in the fourth canto; its melancholy tone and obsession with the past annoys the headstrong Ida, who says to "trim our sails, and let old bygones be." Such criticisms were frequently leveled at Tennyson's work by his critics, who thought his use of medieval legends outdated, and his thinking simplistic. However many of his poems that deal with similar themes, such as "Crossing the Bar," *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, "Ulysses," "Morte d'Arthur" and "Tithonus" have become classics of English literature.

The last four of this group have a particular relationship with "Tears, Idle Tears": they were all written shortly after the death of Arthur Hallam, a dear friend of the poet, and share a melancholic tone and an interest in life, death, and memory.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Tennyson wrote the poem independently from the main narrative of *The Princess*, inserting it later. He had been inspired by a visit to the destitute but beautiful medieval Tintern Abbey, which he described as "full of its bygone memories. It is the sense of abiding in the transient." By "abiding in the transient"

he means things from the past enduring into the present, despite the destructiveness of time.

Tennyson's friend Arthur Hallam was also buried near Tintern Abbey, leading some to link the poem's sense of loss to his death. However Tennyson himself denied this, writing later to another friend that the sadness he felt on his visit "was not real woe" but rather "the yearning that young people occasionally experience for that which seems to have passed away from them forever." In another letter he further denied the link to Hallam, explaining that since he was a boy he had felt "what I called the *passion of the past*." Although it is impossible to be definite either way, Tennyson's explanations do echo the poem's own sense of vagueness and generality about grief.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Another Introduction to the Poem — Read an introduction to some aspects of the poem, written by Cambridge University English professors. (https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/cambridgeauthors/tennyson-tears-idle-tears/)
- Tennyson's Manuscripts — See high definition images of Cambridge University's collection of Tennyson's manuscripts. (https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/tennyson/1)
- "Tears, Idle Tears" Read Aloud — Listen to a recording of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36Lg1NYiNaE)
- "In Memoriam A.H.H." — Read Tennyson's most famous poem, which was dedicated to his friend Arthur Henry Hallam (whose initials are in the title), and who may also have partly inspired "Tears, Idle Tears." (https://poets.org/poem/memoriam-h-h)
- The Poem Sung to Music — Listen to the poem performed to music, as by the maid in The Princess. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QMZ1CMoFHXo)
- Full Text of "The Princess" — Read "The Princess," the narrative poem in which "Tears, Idle Tears" was originally published. (https://www.gutenberg.org/files/791/791-h/791-h.htm)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ALFRED LORD TENNYSON POEMS

- Crossing the Bar
- The Brook
- The Charge of the Light Brigade
- Ulysses

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Clement, Mathis. "*Tears, Idle Tears.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 8 May 2019. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Clement, Mathis. "*Tears, Idle Tears.*" LitCharts LLC, May 8, 2019. Retrieved April 22, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/alfred-lord-tennyson/tears-idle-tears.