

Poem 50, from Tennyson's *In Memoriam*

Be near me when my light is low,
 When the blood creeps, and the nerves prick
 And tingle; and the heart is sick,
And all the wheels of Being slow.

Be near me when the sensuous frame
 Is rack'd with pangs that conquer trust;
 And Time, a maniac scattering dust,
And Life, a Fury slinging flame.

Be near me when my faith is dry,
 And men the flies of latter spring,
 That lay their eggs, and sting and sing
And weave their petty cells and die.

Be near me when I fade away,
 To point the term of human strife,
 And on the low dark verge of life
The twilight of eternal day.

Joshua Mehigan comments:

The basic hope and despair of this poem are not new to poets or to humanity in general. This poem, like many others in *In Memoriam*, is full of disturbing images and phrases. "And Time, a maniac scattering dust" is one of my favorites. I also like the creepy comparison of people to short-lived flies, and the daring, horrible, and (in the context) understandable suggestion that the cycle of life and death is pointless. The poem implies that human children are like insect eggs! This is a sickening notion. Imagine how much more sickening it must have been to Victorian Britons. But, equally important, I think, are Tennyson's rhetoric, form, and versification, which give the poem most of its saturnine power.

In terms of rhetoric, we might first notice that Tennyson directly addresses his dead friend. The poem is emotionally raw, but also oddly formal: raw because Tennyson addresses his inmost, desperate feelings to a beloved friend; formal because directly addressing dead people is a convention of poetry and oratory. Probably the most important and obvious rhetorical device at work here is the repetition of "Be near me when . . ." This repetition contains a pause, too, between "me" and "when," and it becomes more and more portentous as the phrase repeats, each time introducing new griefs. The pause follows an odd, unaccented syllable, which checks the rising meter and the symmetry of the four-beat line. Tennyson also repeats "and" over and over, so that we feel how overwhelmed he is by despair.

Tennyson varies the poem's rhythm against its meter, varies the positions of the pauses in each line, and occasionally runs over lines, all of which helps create an excited and exciting

texture. He uses specific rhythmic variations with great aplomb: heavy, grave offbeats (e.g., “dark” in “low dark verge”); light beats that sometimes speed things up toward urgency, and sometimes contribute to a more speechlike rhythm; and very regular meter, as in “sing and sing / And weave their petty cells and die,” which further underscores Tennyson’s sense of a tediously repetitious and pointless life cycle.

In terms of stanzaic form, the first thing contemporary readers will probably notice is the regular rhyme. It’s often misleading to generalize about the meaning of a rhyme scheme, but I think this one, in this poem, creates a kind of rising and ebbing emphasis, partly because no rhyme is answered till the third line of its stanza, which ends on a heavy rhyme sound, and then the fourth line resonates more subtly with the distant first. Though there are abundant rhythmic variations and at least one line in each stanza where the syntax runs past the line-end, the closed stanza—known as the *In Memoriam* stanza—gives finality to each upwelling of despair. Finally, after each stanza ends, there’s another, more portentous pause, and we are back where we started rhetorically, formally, rhythmically, and emotionally.