

## \* English. \*

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This department, it is desired, will contain general articles on English, suggestive criticism of the English Literature prescribed for Ontario Departmental Examinations, and answers to whatever difficulties the teacher of English may encounter in his work. Contributions are solicited, for which, whenever possible the editor will afford space.

### RING OUT, WILD BELLS.

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ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON.

*In Memoriam*, say the critics, is the noblest elegy in the English language. It appeared in 1850, at first anonymously. The poet's dearest friend, Arthur Hallam, the historian's son, who would have been brought into a still closer relationship with Tennyson by marriage with the latter's sister, had not

— that remorseless iron hour  
Made cypress of her orange flower,"

died at Vienna in 1833. A series of one hundred and twenty-nine poems, full of tenderest pathos and with all the rhythmic charm characteristic of Tennyson's best efforts, was the poet's tribute to the memory of his friend. That he finds it possible to write on such a theme, to put in words something of the grief he feels for one whose place no second friend can fill, seems almost a sin.

But, for the unquiet heart and brain,  
A use in measured language lies;  
The sad mechanic exercise,  
Like dull narcotics, numbing pain."

Yet it is not the unmanly wail of a personal sorrow that is prolonged through these one hundred and twenty-nine poems. The inner life of the human soul, its fitful struggles, its holiest feelings, its moods of depression and hopefulness, of darkest doubt and sublimest faith—all its storms and calms—are vividly portrayed.

*Ring Out, Wild Bells* forms the 106th poem of the series. In the two preceding poems, Christmas—but a Christmas spent in a new home—is described. The poet is sad, for

"We live within the stranger's land,  
And strangely falls our Christmas eve.  
Our father's dust is left alone  
And silent under other snows;  
There in due time the woodbine blows,  
The violet comes, but we are gone."

He makes an effort to be cheerful, feeling that the "cares that petty shadows cast" should

"A little spare the night I loved,  
And hold it solemn to the last."

But he has no heart for the usual Christmas festivities,

"For who would keep an ancient form  
Thro' which the spirit breathes no more?"

New Year's eve comes, and the poet is in a happier mood. The spirit of hopefulness has triumphed,

and, in glad faith that the future holds better gifts than the past has bestowed, that the good will grow until it finally triumphs over the evil, he hails the New Year which the bells are ringing in.

In an analysis of the poem for the purpose of ensuring a clear comprehension, and, if possible, something approaching to a proper appreciation or it, the following suggestions, questions and explanations are offered the teacher:

Stanza 1.—(a) What kind of scene is suggested by the expressions, "wild sky," "flying cloud," "frosty light"? Is "wild" in "wild bells" used in the same sense as in "wild sky"?

(b) "The year is dying . . . let him die." The year is represented as a person dying. Compare "The Death of the Old Year," by the same poet, in which the personification is much stronger, e.g.

"How hard he breathes! over the snow  
I heard just now the crowing cock.  
The shadows flicker to and fro,  
The cricket chirps, the light burns low,  
'Tis nearly twelve o'clock.  
Shake hands before you die,  
Old year, we'll dearly rue for you;  
What is it we can do for you?  
Speak out before you die."

Stanza 2.—(a) "Ring, happy bells . . . let him go." How different the sentiment in these lines from that contained in those quoted above! Here, thinking of the sorrows the past has brought him, and hoping better things of the future, he is eager to see the old year go and the new year enter in; in the other poem, thinking of the joy and jollity the old year gave, and afraid of the trouble the new year may be bringing, he feels

"I've half a mind to die with you,  
Old year, if you must die."

(b) "The false"—"the true." This first wish of the poet seems a kind of general prelude, or text, to what follows. By "the false" he seems to mean all those things which produce the discords of life—the *griefs, feuds*, etc., which he enumerates afterwards; by "the true," all those things which cause the harmony of life—the sweeter manners, purer laws, the love of good, etc.

Stanza 3.—(a) ". . . the grief that saps the mind." What personal reference here? How does grief "sap the mind"? Does this contradict what the poet says elsewhere in *In Memoriam*?

"I hold it truth whate'er befall,  
I feel it when I sorrow most;  
'Tis better to have loved and lost,  
Than never to have loved at all."

(b) "The feud of rich and poor."—The long-standing hatred between the two. In such an old country as England inequalities in the distribution of wealth are much more marked than here. Is Tennyson's dream any nearer realization than when he wrote these words? That the riddle of the growing poverty of the masses with the growing wealth of the race has engaged the attention of the greatest minds, we know. Whether a cure for the evil can be found seems doubtful, but if cure there be, surely the fact that all sorts and conditions of thinkers, from Henry George in "Progress and Poverty," to General Booth in "In Darkest England," are seeking it, should lead us to hope that it will somehow and soon be found.

Stanza 4.—(a) "Ring out a slowly dying cause,  
And ancient forms of party strife."

Tennyson is not a politician, though he takes an active interest in great national questions. He seems to prophecy here the close of party government, with all the strife which it occasions. Cox, in his "British Commonwealth," in speaking of party government, remarks that it is by no means a necessary thing, and is inclined to think that though in its day it has served a good purpose, that day is almost over. As it had a beginning, it seems reasonable to suppose it may have an ending. It is true, as Macaulay remarks, that in one sense party government always has existed, but only in the sense in which we may say there are two parties in every department of life, that is, a party anxious to preserve, and a party anxious to make changes. But in the sense in which we understand party government, it certainly did not exist in England till the time of Charles I., or, in the strictest meaning of the expression, not till William III.'s reign. Still the hot party spirit existing at this day in England doesn't seem to point to a speedy fulfilment of Tennyson's prediction. Or is it rather a wish than a hope he expresses?

(b) "Nobler modes of life," "sweeter manners," "purer laws."—As our lives become nobler, our manners, the reflections of our lives, will of themselves become sweeter; and as the laws of any (free) people are an index to the national character, they will become purer as that character improves. There has been a great improvement in English laws since the eighteenth century, especially in the criminal law—for example, men are no longer hanged for theft—but we have not yet reached the point beyond which no advance is possible.

Stanza 5.—(a) "The want, the care, the sin."—Note the order in which the words occur. Does Tennyson intend a climax?—"the want." The poverty and wretchedness, the physical distress, that must be removed before anything else can be done; "the care"—the mental distress, worse even than physical wretchedness; "the sin"—moral evil, worst of all, worse than any suffering, the cause of nearly all suffering.

(b) "The faithless coldness of the times."—The absence of sympathy for suffering humanity Tennyson looks upon as the most discouraging feature of the times. And why this absence of sympathy? Because men have no faith in humanity, hence no motive for trying to better it. There are more "infidels to Adam" than "infidels to God." Some hopeful spirits like Tennyson persist in believing that "somehow good will be the final goal of ill," but many have no power to help, because no power to believe in any good to come from any effort to assist helpless, struggling humanity.

(c) "Ring out, ring out my mournful rhymes,  
But ring the fuller minstrel in."

Tennyson does not do justice to himself here. His rhymes may be mournful, but critical judgment has decided that such poetry as *In Memoriam* deserves and will meet with a better fate than the poet prophesies for it when he says elsewhere:

"These mortal lullabies of pain  
May bind a book, may line a box,  
May serve to curl a maiden's locks."

(d) "Minstrel."—A minstrel in mediæval times was a poet who sang, usually to the accompaniment of a harp, his own poetry. But the art of writing, and afterwards the invention of printing, made this combination unnecessary, and the race of poet-singers died out. In Scott's "Lay of the Last Minstrel" we have an illustration of how the once honored guests of castle and hall sank in social status. There the word is used simply for poetry. "Fuller minstrel."—The perfect poet with full command of feeling and expression; not singing in one mournful strain, as Tennyson says he sings.

Stanza 6.—(a) "Ring out false pride in place and blood."—Tennyson, in many places, speaks out his scorn for this false pride. Compare the lines in *Clara Vere de Vere*—

"Trust me, Clara Vere de Vere,  
From yon blue heavens above us bent,  
The gardener Adam and his wife  
Smile at the claims of long descent,  
How'er it be, it seems to me,  
'Tis only noble to be good,  
Kind hearts are more than coronets,  
And simple faith than Norman blood."

(b) "The civic slander and the spite."—It is so well known a fact that public men are slandered, that any candidate for any public position expects it as a matter of course. "*Civic*"—"civis," a citizen.

(c) "Ring in the love of truth and right,  
Ring in the common love of good."

If the conduct of public men were based upon such motives as these, "the civic slander and the spite" would soon cease.

Stanza 7.—(a) "Foul disease."—Does Tennyson refer here to moral or physical disease, disease of the mind or of the body?

(b) "The narrowing lust of gold." How is the love of money "narrowing"?

(c) "Ring out the thousand wars of old,  
Ring in the thousand years of peace."

Can you point to any instances in modern times to show that nations are beginning to settle their disputes by diplomacy rather than by war? Compare the hopeful spirit shown here with a similar hopefulness in Locksley Hall—

"Till the war-drum throb'd no longer, and the  
battle-flags were fur'd  
In the parliament of man, the federation of the  
world."