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Between Dawn and Dusk: Faith, Doubt, and the Meaning of Light in Tennyson's Poetry

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Abstract
This article examines Alfred Lord Tennyson's strategic deployment of diurnal and nocturnal imageryspecifically light, darkness, dawn, and twilightto map the psychological and theological terrain of Victorian faith and doubt. Rather than operating within a rigid binary in which illumination signifies absolute divine truth and shadow denotes uncomplicated despair, Tennyson's poetic corpus destabilizes these traditional tropes to reflect an era defined by spiritual dislocation. Through close formal, prosodic, and thematic readings of In Memoriam A.H.H. (1850), "The Two Voices" (1842), and "Crossing the Bar" (1889)alongside contextual engagement with major dramatic monologues such as "Ulysses" and "Tithonus"this study demonstrates how transitional hours capture the shifting phenomenology of grief and epistemological uncertainty. By analyzing Tennyson's manipulation of meter, rhyme schemes, and sound texture, the paper reveals that daylight frequently functions as an intrusive, clinical spotlight exposing cold material realities, whereas darkness and dusk often cultivate a protective sanctuary for quiet, unverified hope. Ultimately, Tennyson redefines religious faith not as a static possession of certainty, but as an exhausting, ongoing navigation across an unstable spiritual horizon.

Keywords: *Alfred Lord Tennyson, faith and doubt, Victorian crisis of faith, light and darkness, In Memoriam A.H.H., prosody, literary analysis.*

I. Introduction:

The Victorian Epistemological Crisis and the Instability of Light

During the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the foundational pillars of British religious orthodoxy underwent unprecedented seismic pressure. The rapid urbanization driven by industrial capitalism, paired with groundbreaking developments in geology, paleontology, and early evolutionary theory—most notably Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830–1833) and Robert Chambers's *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844)systematically dismantled traditional biblical chronologies and teleological assumptions about human exceptionalism. Victorian intellectuals found themselves stranded in an agonizing historical interregnum, famously characterized by Matthew Arnold in "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse" as wandering between a dying religious world and a materialistic future powerless to be born. They could no longer inhabit the unexamined, inherited faith of their ancestors without intellectual dishonesty, yet the emerging scientific worldview presented a cosmos that appeared mechanistic, vast, and entirely indifferent to human sorrow.

Alfred Lord Tennyson articulated this psychological and metaphysical friction with unmatched formal precision and emotional resonance. As Poet Laureate and the quintessential voice of his age, Tennyson repeatedly returned to the problem of human mortality, the unfeeling silence of the natural world, and the desperate search for spiritual anchor points in an era of empirical skepticism. In literary criticism, early twentieth-century and mid-century scholars such as Jerome Hamilton Buckley frequently interpreted Tennyson's visual imagery through a conventional Romantic or Christian-allegorical lens [Buckley, 1960]. Under this traditional framework, the rising sun and the return of daylight were read as emblems of spiritual regeneration, moral clarity, and triumphant faith, whereas night and shadow functioned as straightforward containers for melancholia, isolation, and doubt [Buckley, 1960].

While such binary readings account for the surface movement of several Tennyson lyrics, they overlook the profound ambivalence that governs his poetic mechanics. As Isobel Armstrong has argued, Victorian poetry often operates as a "double poem," simultaneously expressing a conventional sentiment while subverting it through formal tension and linguistic ambiguity [Armstrong, 1993]. A sustained examination of Tennyson's treatment of diurnal cycles reveals that his visual vocabulary is fundamentally unstable. Rather than aligning light with certainty and darkness with despair, Tennyson weaponizes the transitional hours of dawn and dusk to mirror the volatile, non-linear nature of modern belief. In his work, daylight rarely descends as a comforting revelation; instead, it frequently breaks over the landscape as a harsh, clinical glare that strips away comforting illusions and forces the grieving subject to confront the physical permanence of loss. Conversely, the gathering shadows of evening and twilight repeatedly soften the sharp edges of empirical reality, offering a quiet liminal space where intuition and hope can survive without the burden of rational proof.

By tracing this inversion across three pivotal works*In Memoriam A.H.H.*, "The Two Voices," and "Crossing the Bar"this study argues that Tennyson transforms the symbolism of light and darkness to redefine the very nature of faith. In Tennyson's poetics, faith is never a clean destination or a static state of illumination; it is an arduous, continuous process of endurance conducted in the half-light between memory and anticipation.

II. In Memoriam A.H.H.: The Harsh Disillusionment of the Dawn

Composed over a seventeen-year period following the sudden, devastating death of his closest friend and intellectual confidant Arthur Henry Hallam in 1833, *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1850) stands as Tennyson's most exhaustive anatomy of grief, scientific doubt, and spiritual survival. Before Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, Tennyson had already absorbed the bleak implications of evolutionary extinction, envisioning a natural order indifferent to both the individual life and the survival of entire species. To contain this sprawling, nearly three-thousand-line elegy, Tennyson adopted a highly distinctive structural vehicle: the *In Memoriam* stanza, consisting of four lines of iambic tetrameter rhyming ABBA.

As Herbert F. Tucker has demonstrated, this enclosed rhyme scheme creates a subtle yet relentless prosodic trap [Tucker, 1988]. Unlike the forward-propelling momentum of alternating rhyme (ABAB) or heroic couplets, the internal BB rhyme pair arrests the linear progression of thought, pulling the reader's ear and voice backward toward the initial A sound before permitting a transition to the subsequent quatrain [Tucker, 1988]. This recursive, circular architecture mimics the inescapable psychological loops of clinical trauma and melancholia, where the mourning mind continually circles back to the central fact of absence rather than advancing toward consolation.

Because the poem's very form resists easy linear progress, the arrival of morning light within *In Memoriam* frequently fails to deliver the spiritual rescue promised by traditional pastoral elegy. In classical elegiessuch as John Milton's *Lycidas*the rising sun symbolizes resurrection and the restoration of cosmic order. Tennyson deliberately subverts this convention in the famous seventh lyric of the sequence. Here, the sleepless, bereaved speaker wanders through the pre-dawn streets of London to stand outside Hallam's former residence on Wimpole Street, only to confront the physical emptiness of the building and the cold indifference of the waking city.

In the concluding lines of Section 7, Tennyson orchestrates a deliberate metrical collapse to strip the sunrise of any sacred warmth. After establishing a relatively regular iambic pulse in the preceding lines, the final linedescribing the arrival of the pale, empty morning across the wet pavementshatters the rhythmic expectation by colliding heavy, stressed monosyllables directly against one another. The abrupt spondaic substitutions and harsh, unyielding plosive consonants create an auditory experience of physical jarring and emotional exhaustion. Rather than bringing theological insight or soothing warmth, the dawn emerges as spectral, drained of color, and devoid of meaning. Light here acts as an unsparing diagnostic instrument: it illuminates the dreary urban landscape, the cold drizzle, and the mechanical resumption of daily commerce, brutally underscoring the speaker's isolation. The morning does not banish doubt; it validates it by exposing a material world that continues to turn effortlessly without the beloved.

This antipathy toward harsh, exposing daylight recurs throughout the elegy, notably in Section 119, which revisits the same London street years later. Although the speaker's acute agony has softened into a more tempered nostalgiaallowing him to perceive the scent of meadows and the twittering of birds amidst the urban architecturethe light of early morning remains tethered to the physical, sensory world rather than transcendent revelation. Even more tellingly, in the philosophical middle sections of the poem (Sections 54–56), when the speaker attempts to trust that good will somehow be the final goal of ill, his fragile intuition is immediately assaulted by the empirical evidence of geology and biology. In these moments, the "light" of human intellect and scientific observation proves purely destructive, revealing a history of creation written in fossilized violence and extinction.

Where, then, does spiritual solace reside in *In Memoriam*? Repeatedly, Tennyson locates moments of genuine communion and metaphysical hope not in the bright clarity of noon, but in the muted, shadowy hours of night and twilight. In Section 95widely regarded as the mystical climax of the entire poemthe speaker sits alone on the lawn at Somersby during a warm summer night after his family has retired indoors. Surrounded by darkness, reading Hallam's old letters by the faint glow of a lantern until the flame dies out, the speaker experiences a sudden, trance-like sense of spiritual contact with the dead. In the absence of visual distractions and the harsh demands of daytime empiricism, the boundaries between the living and the dead dissolve, allowing the speaker to feel the pulse of a larger, living universe. Yet, tellingly, this ecstatic vision is immediately threatened by the approach of dawn. As the grey light of morning begins to creep across the hills, the trance breaks, and the speaker is forced back into the rational, skeptical waking consciousness. Throughout *In Memoriam*, darkness shelters the intuitive soul, while daylight reimposes the burden of doubt.

III. "The Two Voices": The Claustrophobia of the Inner Twilight

If *In Memoriam* traps grief within a recursive quatrain, Tennyson's earlier dramatic dialogue "The Two Voices" (begun in 1833 immediately after Hallam's death and published in 1842) compresses existential despair into an even tighter formal vise. The poem is structured entirely in stanzas of three rhyming lines of iambic tetrameter (AAA), a relentless triplet pattern that denies the reader the harmonic resolution of a fourth line. As Christopher Ricks has observed, this triple-rhyme architecture generates an atmosphere of acute psychological claustrophobia, turning each tercet into a sealed cell of obsessive rumination [Ricks, 1972].

The dramatic premise of "The Two Voices" is an agonizing nocturnal psychomachia—an internal debate waged in the suffocating darkness before dawn between the speaker's embattled will to live and a cold, hyper-rational inner voice advocating suicide. This dark voice anticipates the bleakest conclusions of Victorian materialism and proto-evolutionary science. Whenever the speaker attempts to defend the value of human life by invoking Victorian ideals of progress, moral striving, or humanity's status as the crown of creation, the cynical voice systematically dismantles his arguments. It reminds him of the dizzying scale of geological time, the insignificance of a single human consciousness amidst billions of other organisms, and the biological reality that nature mass-produces and discards sentient beings without purpose or regret. Under the relentless logic of this voice, the human mind is reduced to a fleeting chemical accident, and suicide appears to be the only rational escape from pointless suffering.

Throughout hundreds of lines of dialectical combat, the speaker fails to defeat the dark voice on intellectual grounds. Every theological or humanistic counterargument is exposed as wishful thinking or anthropocentric vanity. The resolution of the poem arrives only at the absolute end, when the long night finally yields to a Sunday morning. Exhausted by the stalemate, the speaker steps away from his window, walks out into the sunlit fields, and observes a quiet domestic triada father, mother, and young daughterwalking peacefully together toward a village church to the sound of ringing bells. Witnessing this scene, the speaker feels the oppressive weight of his suicidal despair lift, allowing him to perceive a hidden hope and rejoice in the simple fact of existence.

For decades, modern critics dismissed the conclusion of "The Two Voices" as a sentimental failure of nervea conventional Victorian evasion designed to reassure conservative readers after a daring philosophical exploration. However, a close inspection of the poem's formal and visual mechanics reveals a far more complex and ambiguous strategy. The arrival of the Sunday morning sunlight does not provide a logical refutation of the dark voice's evolutionary nihilism. None of the terrifying questions regarding cosmic indifference, human mortality, or the absence of empirical proof for the afterlife are answered by the sunrise.

Instead, the daylight operates purely as a spatial and sensory distraction. By shifting the speaker's visual focus from the dark interior of his roomthe claustrophobic chamber of pure intellectto the external, sunlit panorama of communal ritual and family affection, the morning light breaks the hypnotic spell of solitary rationalism. Crucially, Tennyson maintains the exact same rigid AAA triplet rhyme scheme through the final stanzas of the poem. The formal container does not expand or relax into a more open meter; the prosodic cage remains intact. This structural continuity signals that the underlying existential dread has not been intellectually cured, but merely held at bay. In "The Two Voices," daylight is neither absolute truth nor divine revelation; it is a vital, life-preserving illusiona comforting visual surface that enables human beings to endure an unanswerable inner darkness.

IV. "Crossing the Bar": The Quiet Peace of the Dusk

By the final decade of his life, Tennyson had moved beyond the frantic, combative skepticism of his middle years, arriving at a posture of serene, agnostic trust. In "Crossing the Bar" (1889)composed in his eighty-first year while crossing the Solent from Aldworth to Farringford, and placed by his explicit instructions at the very end of every collected edition of his poetryTennyson executes a complete inversion of traditional light-and-dark symbolism.

The poem constructs an extended maritime metaphor for the passage from mortal life into death. Rather than framing the end of life as a terrifying descent into an abyss or a desperate struggle against extinguishing light, Tennyson sets the scene at sunset. The imagery of the evening star, the twilight bell, and the gathering darkness evokes a profound sense of cosmic equilibrium and quietude. In this late lyric, the approaching night is stripped of all associations with isolation, terror, or spiritual blindness. On the contrary, the dusk represents a gentle release from the turbulent, noisy demands of earthly existence.

Central to this symbolic reversal is the role of the evening star. Unlike the blinding, all-exposing glare of the midday sun or the ghastly, clinical dawn of *In Memoriam*, the evening star offers a single, steady point of luminescence suspended within the encroaching shadow. It does not illuminate the vast, unknowable ocean stretching beyond the sandbar; it does not map the geography of the afterlife or offer empirical certainty regarding what lies beyond the boundary of death. Instead, it serves as a modest, sufficient beacona localized light that guides the vessel outward without pretending to abolish the mystery of the night.

Tennyson's speaker actively welcomes the transition from day to dark, explicitly asking that there be no

sadness of farewell as he embarks upon the tide. Within the epistemological framework of the poem, full daylight corresponds to the limitations of mortal, rational consciousnessa state bound to the physical shoreline of time and space, where the human mind is perpetually frustrated by its inability to grasp infinite truths. As long as the speaker remains in the bright light of earthly reason, direct spiritual knowledge remains impossible. Only by sailing directly into the twilightby surrendering the demand for visual clarity and embracing the obscurity of deathcan the speaker hope to encounter his divine Pilot face to face.

Here, Tennyson resolves the lifelong tension between scientific skepticism and religious longing by redefining the function of darkness. Shadow is no longer the enemy of faith; it is the indispensable medium through which faith achieves maturity. In the peaceful gathering of the dusk, belief is finally liberated from the exhausting Victorian compulsion to prove itself against materialist critique.

V. Broader Resonances: Twilight Liminality Across the Tennysonian Canon

The destabilization of light and shadow observed in *In Memoriam*, "The Two Voices," and "Crossing the Bar" is not an isolated phenomenon confined to Tennyson's explicitly religious lyrics; rather, it forms a foundational grammar across his entire body of work, particularly in his dramatic monologues of classical mythology. In poems such as "Ulysses" (1833) and "Tithonus" (1860), Tennyson uses the exact same diurnal thresholds to interrogate human purpose, mortality, and the burden of consciousness.

In "Ulysses"written in the immediate aftermath of Hallam's death as an expression of the need to press forward despite griefthe aging hero stands at the port as the day wanes. Tennyson fills the closing movement of the monologue with the imagery of fading light, twinkling rocks, and the slow climbing of the moon. Yet this gathering dusk is charged with a complex, double-edged energy. On one hand, the fading day mirrors Ulysses's declining physical strength and the approaching darkness of death; on the other, the twilight horizon becomes the sole arena left for heroic aspiration, urging the mariners to sail beyond the sunset into an uncharted western sea. Like the speaker of "Crossing the Bar," Ulysses recognizes that the bright, static world of Ithacaassociated with domestic routine and settled knowledgeoffers no further scope for the restless spirit, forcing him to seek meaning in the dimming light of the unknown.

Conversely, in "Tithonus," Tennyson exposes the horror of eternal daylight divorced from human mortality. Having been granted immortality without eternal youth, Tithonus is trapped in the gleaming, silver halls of the East alongside Aurora, the goddess of the dawn. For Tithonus, the daily arrival of morning light is a recurring torture. As the rosy radiance of dawn spreads across the sky, illuminating Aurora's immortal beauty, it simultaneously exposes Tithonus's own withered, decaying body—a living shadow unable to die. Here, dawn symbolizes a cruel, indifferent cosmic renewal that mocks human fragility. Tithonus's deepest longing is to be released from the suffocating brightness of the eastern sky and returned to the dark, quiet earth where mortal men lie buried. Once again, Tennyson aligns relentless illumination with existential agony and bestows upon darkness the mercy of rest and closure.

VI. Conclusion: Living in the Half-Light

By systematically dismantling the conventional moral equations of light and darkness, Alfred Lord Tennyson crafted a poetic language uniquely suited to articulate the spiritual anxieties of the modern age. Across his major works, illumination and shadow refuse to settle into comfortable allegorical binaries. Daylight repeatedly emerges as a cold, unfeeling spotlight that exposes human isolation, amplifies the grief of material loss, or imposes a fragile, distracting surface over unanswerable philosophical terror. Conversely, night and twilight frequently provide an essential refugea quiet, unguarded space where the rational intellect ceases its relentless interrogation and allows intuitive hope to breathe.

Ultimately, Tennyson's manipulation of dawn and dusk situates the human condition in a state of permanent liminality. He refuses to offer his readers either the blinding certainty of pre-modern religious dogmatism or the bleak finality of pure scientific materialism. Instead, he leaves humanity standing at the edge of the twilight, suspended between an inherited faith that can no longer be held without struggle and an empirical future that offers knowledge without consolation. In Tennyson's universe, the true meaning of light is never found in the triumphant, midday glare of absolute truth; it resides in the quiet, persistent courage to look out into the gathering dusk and sustain hope in the dark.

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