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Sound and Stillness: How Sensory Detail Creates Melancholy in “Mariana” and “The Lotos-Eaters”

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Abstract
"Mariana" was released by Tennyson in 1830 and "The Lotos-Eaters" was released two years later in 1832. Both poems contain sadness that is almost entirely conveyed through the senses without an explanation. It is all the sensations he uses including the rusted nail, the ticking of a clock, a mouse, and the intermittent flowing of a stream that tell the reader what to feel. The aim of this article is to examine how the two poems come across the way they do and suggests it is through opposing forces, namely sound and stillness. In "Mariana" he utilizes small household sounds to break the silence. Each small sound increases the depth of the silence for the listener and each household sensation increases the reader's awareness of how desolate Mariana's life is. In "The Lotos-Eaters," the author uses contrasting pressures. Rather than small household sounds to create stillness he uses the power of sound in combination with the effects of water and warm air to persuade the sailors to rest to the point where they stop wanting to fight to live. The article contrasts both poems with their sources which include "Measure for Measure" by Shakespeare and "The Odyssey" by Homer as well as a poem of praise written in 1831 by Arthur Hallam about Tennyson as a poet of sensation. Using older concepts of both Ruskin's pathetic fallacy and Freud's mourning and melancholia, the author analyzes the poems in their context within the time frame of Tennyson's early life. Hallam's untimely death, which occurred in 1833, means that both of these poems were composed prior to that event, thus dispelling any ideas that the sadness of these poems may be simple mourning. In addition to a table of sources and themes, a figure is provided mapping out the sensory aspects of "Mariana" centered on the poem's refrain. Mirror image analyses conclude that one poem puts a woman in a house and exposes her to household sounds and one poem puts sailors in a coast setting and lullaby sounds are all they are able to focus on. Ultimately both poems achieve their intended effect of letting the reader feel that life is not worth the effort of movement."

Keywords: *Tennyson, Mariana, The Lotos-Eaters, sensory imagery, melancholy, Victorian poetry*

I. Introduction

1.1 Two Rooms, Two Shores

Close your eyes and try to imagine the name “Mariana.” It doesn’t evoke any specific narrative or storyline, because there really isn’t any narrative to evoke. In fact, throughout eighty-four lines, absolutely nothing happens. We’re given nothing more than weather, a couple of shadows, and a few small noises, including a buzzing fly and a shrieking mouse. After stating she’s tired of living, everything starts all over again.

Consider “The Lotos-Eaters” in the same way. The only thing different about this poem is its setting. Instead of an isolated house, we have sailors on an “always afternoon” coast, having eaten a flower that makes them choose to sit and listen to the ocean rather than sail back home. Once again, nothing much happens. It’s mostly just a report on the sight and sound of everything around a certain mood.

These poems aren’t famous for anything else but being sad. Mariana is sad, but why? All we know is her lover hasn’t come. Why are the sailors sad? It takes a while, and it sounds pretty half-asleep when we find out. Why do these poems evoke sadness without providing any reasons for the emotion? Why do they tell us how the sad world looks and sounds?

1.2 Argument and Approach

In his poems “Mariana” and “The Lotos-Eaters”, Tennyson creates a balance of stillness and noise, but to varying degrees and for different purposes. In “Mariana”, the default state is stillness, with intrusive small, dull noises that serve only to highlight her isolation. The default state in “The Lotos-Eaters” is sound, with a soft, persistent murmur. Stillness is what the poem argues in favour of wanting.

I’m mostly working with close readings of Ricks’s (1987) editions of the 1830 and 1842 poems, though I have brought in a few other concepts. One is Ruskin’s idea of the “pathetic fallacy” to account for why a poet would use a house or even a beach as an extension of a person’s own emotions (Ruskin, 1856). A second is

Freud's idea on "Mourning and Melancholia" to discuss grief when an object has been lost, and the mourning has started to take on the characteristics of the object (Freud, 1917/1957). The final is an earlier critique of Tennyson by his most loyal reader, Arthur Hallam, to illustrate what Tennyson was attempting to do (Hallam, 1831).

I don't really view these concepts as solutions; rather, they serve to enhance what I can see for myself within the poems.

II. Background

2.1 A Young Poet's Ear

In 1830, when Tennyson's Poems, Chiefly Lyrical was published, he was twenty years old. Mariana, one of the included poems, has many associations to the location where he spent his youth, a rectory near the fens (Martin, 1980). A lot of readers link the dreary country in Mariana to that region. According to his son, Tennyson said that the grange, the house of Mariana, did not exist. He told his son that he drew it from his imagination while listening to Shakespeare's words.

While in Cambridge, Tennyson got acquainted with Hallam, his first serious critic. In his review of 1831, Hallam distinguished poets as writing from imagination and other as "poets of sensation." The first group draws inspiration from reflection. The second group is made of writers who work from the stimuli they receive from the world. Hallam classified Tennyson in the second group, and gave him credit for the skill with which he linked together several different images into one state of feeling. These poems support this observation even too perfectly. Armstrong notes that Victorian poets have inherited the technique of Romantics, in which feelings are accessed through the senses. Tennyson introduced an added element of enclosure.

2.2 Borrowed Women and Borrowed Sailors

These poems and their borrow sources share many commonalities. Tennyson's "Mariana" (1830) uses Shakespeare's "Measure for Measure" for her story. She loses her brother and her dowry when he is killed. Her home is a moated grange and this becomes the focus of the main action for her character where she listens to "Take, O take those lips away" and agrees to Isabella's "bed trick" so Mariana can sleep with a man in Isabella's place.

In "The Lotos-Eaters" (Tennyson, 1832/1842), Odysseus and his crew land on an island and encounter people who feed on the lotus plant. His crew begin to lose the desire to go back home. Odysseus has to drag them back to the ships. Tennyson reimagined this part of the "Odyssey" with much more complexity than in the original. Both of his original and his revised versions in 1832 and 1842 showcase his commitment to this work.

One fact worth mentioning is that the poems appeared in the public domain in 1833 (Martin, 1980). Consequently, both poems already embodied a sense of sadness. Because of that, it cannot be linked with the death of Hallam, since he died after that, in September 1833. As noted by T. S. Eliot, "the emotional depth in Tennyson was at a surface level as far as the technique is concerned."

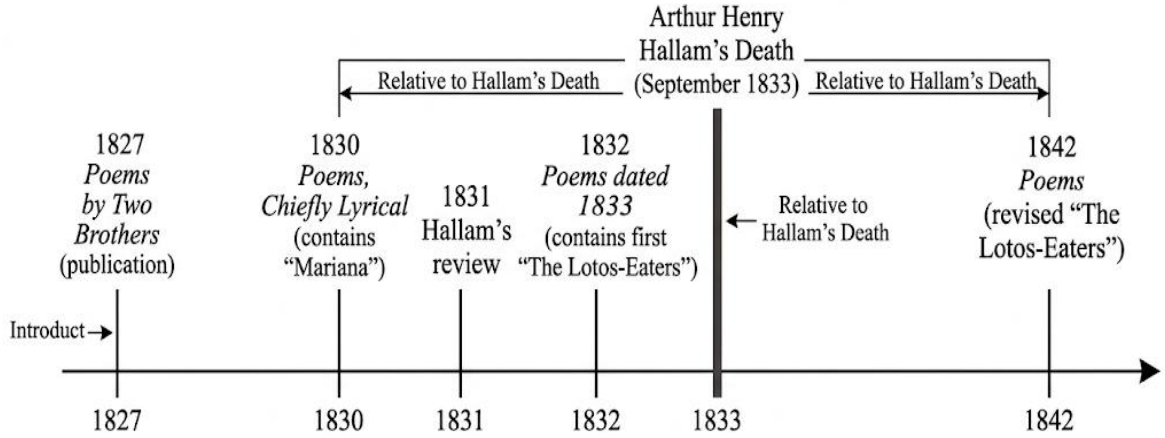


Figure 1: Tennyson's Early Career, 1827–1842, Showing Where "Mariana" and "The Lotos-Eaters" Appear Relative to Hallam's Death

The timeline runs left to right from 1827 to 1842. The timeline displays 1827 Poems by Two Brothers, 1830 Poems, Chiefly Lyrical, and the review of the collection in 1831, Ricks (1987) notes, "As of August 1833... the collection was out of print." The 1832 Poems dated 1833, published the first "Lotos-Eaters," and

Poems by Lord Tennyson in 1842 included the revised version. Most important is the publication dates of the poems relative to Hallam's death, which occured in September 1833. As both versions of the poem were published prior to the death of Hallam, it is not possible to interpret the melancholy in either poem as grief, either before or after his death. Information taken from Martin (1980), Ricks (1987) and Hallam (1831).

III. "Mariana": Small Noises in a Shut House

3.1 What the Eye Gets

The first line of the poem creates an atmosphere of physical decay. Black moss completely covers the flowerbeds. Nails have fallen out of knots in the wood of the pear tree where it was attached to the gable wall. The latch is unlifted. The thatch of the house has become weedy and worn. Look closely at all of these words. They end with "ed." They all tell the reader that these actions happened some time ago and are not happening now.

As with sight, the atmosphere created here is dim. Mariana's tears mix with the evening dew, and she cannot see the sweet morning or evening heavens. When the dark comes she finally pulls the curtain back to peer out at the darkened expanse. Beside the muddy, dark waters stands the lone poplar tree. It is the only tree in the entire, grey, flat expanse.

The description created here reminds me of Ruskin's idea of "the pathetic fallacy" in his work. He claims that people imbue things with feelings based on their mood at the time. I would agree, however, Tennyson utilizes the idea effectively here. The sheds seem lonely and unusual, the water in the sluice is quiet and still, and the time on the clock seems sluggish. Mariana barely even appears on the page. Tennyson uses the atmosphere to portray her sadness for you. That trick is very effective and probably works as well as it does because she doesn't get much more to say besides the refrain.

3.2 What the Ear Gets

Listen more closely and the ears get even more. "In the house that was once so filled with dream-like fantasy, creak by creak, the doors slowly opened." The house begins to sound more like a home. "Behind the house a mouse began to shriek." And as if right on cue, a small house sparrow lands on the roof and begins its chirping. The only sound in the house other than that is the steady tick, tock of the grandfather clock.

Tennyson has mastered the use of these minute sounds in order to convey the sounds that go unnoticed. The sounds that, while present, become magnified in a quiet room, and in this instance are amplified because the house is so empty and the stillness has become so palpable. In the silence that is broken only by the chirping, creaking, and buzzing, Tennyson shows that rather than breaking the silence, the small sounds are actually measuring it.

The wind is also an integral part. As the moon begins to descend, the "shrill winds" are "up and away" and the "gusty shadow" of the poplar tree moves over the white curtain. With the further descent of the moon, the winds are "bound within their cell," and the shadow remains on "her brow." Sounds come with motion; quiet with stillness. Tree shadows are all that touch her.

And he begins to fill in sounds. "The Old faces shimmer'd through the door; / The Old footsteps treaded the old upper floor; / The Old voices call from the outer edge." Memory has made its contribution, and it is the cruelest sound of all, as it is the only sound of human voice. In the darkness she hears the call of the cock in the morning, and the lowing of the cattle from the marshlands. All of the sounds from the farm come to her from afar, suggesting that life is lived outside her own.

Freud makes an appearance, although I wouldn't emphasize his presence too much. In 1917, Freud made a distinction between melancholia, which occurs when a loss is lost and unclear and leads to a cycle of grief, and mourning, which is the process of losing and understanding the loss. It is a one time declaration. The feeling within Mariana has no direction, so the house is left in stasis.

3.3 The Refrain and the Stuck Day

Every stanza of this poem begins with the same words of frustration. "She only said, 'My life is dreary, / He cometh not,' she said; / She said, 'I am aweary, aweary, / I would that I were dead!'" Some parts change to make it clear what causes her frustration; first the day and then the night, then finally herself, saying, "very dreary." Then finally she pleads to God. (Tennyson, 1830) Hallam said about the poem, (Hallam, 1831) the stanza uses the length to set up an explanation before locking everything together.

Refrains repeat, so they act on the ear just like the ticking of a clock. They repeat, and so act on time, just as waiting does. There is a congruence between form and content. This poem is unable to move forward, much like Mariana is. In Figure 2, it can be seen how all the sights and sounds and tactile experiences of the poem lead in the same direction, toward the same final outcome.

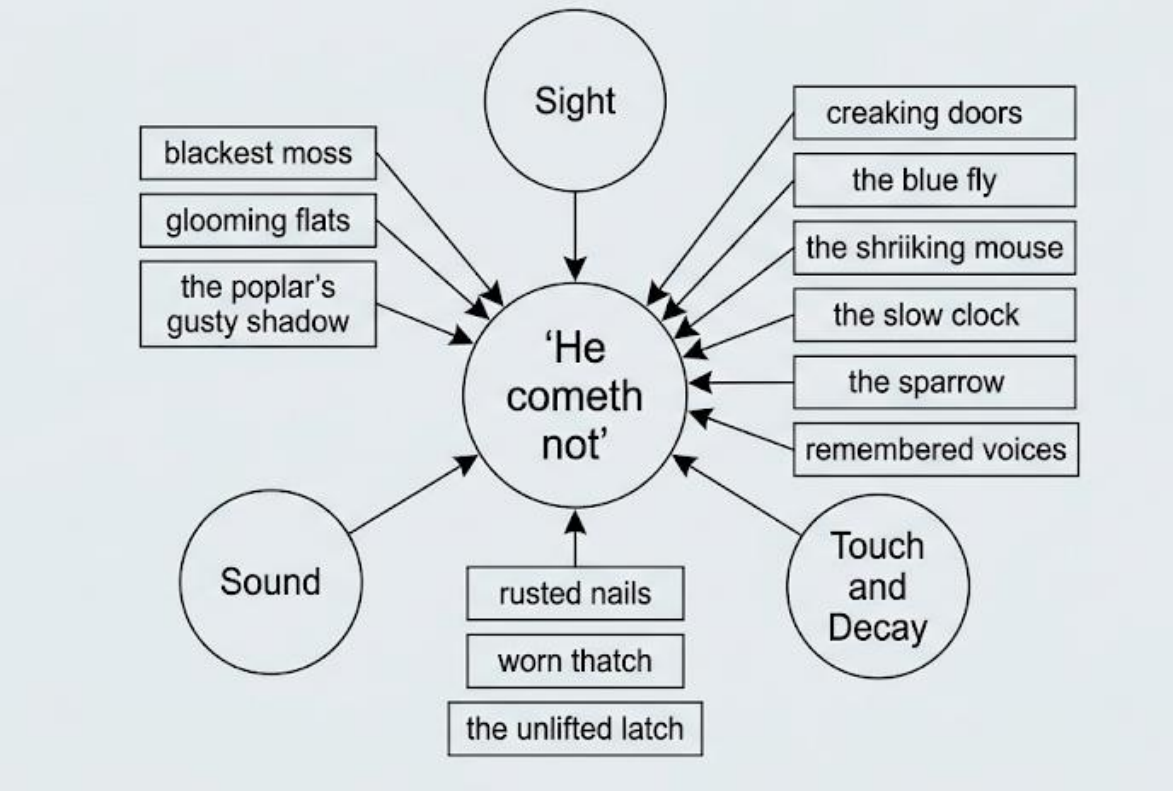


Figure 2: Sensory Inventory of "Mariana": How Sight, Sound, and Touch Details Feed the Refrain

At the center of this diagram is the refrain "He cometh not," surrounded by poem details in three different spokes. The "sight" spoke features blackest moss, glooming flats, and the poplar's gusty shadow. The "sound" spoke includes a creaking door, the blue fly, the shrieking mouse, the slow clock, a sparrow, and some voices of memory. Finally, the "touch-and-decay" spoke lists rusted nails, thatch, and a latch that has not been lifted. Each detail within the diagram adds nothing new, but instead strengthens the single feeling being portrayed in each spoke, and thus all arrows within the diagram point back toward the central refrain. Based on Tennyson (1830) and the Ricks edition (1987).

IV. "The Lotos-Eaters": Music That Argues

4.1 A Land Where It's Always Afternoon

While Mariana uses an approach to lock a door, the poem "The Lotos-Eaters" leaves one open. For example, in the poem, Odysseus yells, "Courage" and draws the crew's attention toward the land, after which the poem moves at a snail's pace. "In the afternoon they came unto a land / In which it seemed always afternoon." The air, for lack of a better word, was stagnant and resembled the act of a weary dream. Across the valley is a full moon, with a thin stream of water "like a downward smoke" and falling with pauses, as it falls, to rest. (Tennyson, 1842)

That miniature phrase captures the essence of the poem. Because the water moves by a pause, and then begins to fall, and then pauses, it essentially moves in no direction. Furthermore, that miniature phrase also causes you to wait, especially during the pauses. Tennyson utilizes the Spenserian form of the poem and utilizes nine stanzas. He draws out the length of each stanza at the end of each, by one beat beyond the others.

The soft focus imagery includes: "slow-dropping veils of thinnest lawn," pinnacles of snow with a sunset flush of pink color, "a land where all things always seem'd the same!" (Tennyson, 1842). This last line doesn't paint any image. It paints sameness.

Then the men consume the flower, and the world begins to grow more distant and silent. The waves "far far away did seem to mourn and rave / On alien shores," and a friend's voice is "thin, as voices from the grave" (Tennyson, 1842). This drug does the exact opposite of what Mariana's house does, in which the world becomes intensified, and even the smallest mouse is like a shriek.

4.2 The Choric Song: Sweet Music and Heavy Eyes

The narrative section gives way to the sailors' singing. The Choric Song starts: "There is sweet music here that softer falls / Than petals from blown roses on the grass." The analogy used by Tennyson (1842) is slow falling and silence. The song states that music "gentlier on the spirit lies, / Than tir'd eyelids upon tir'd eyes." Sound becomes touch and touch becomes sleep. The senses merge in the manner described by Hallam (1831).

Descriptions of nature become increasingly more detailed with creeping ivies and cool mosses. 'Weeping flowers' in the stream are juxtaposed against a poppy 'hung in sleep' on the cliff (Tennyson, 1842). Mariana's flower plots have blackest moss but this moss is a 'cushion'. One image from Tennyson, 'moss', becomes two moods depending on its use and location.

At the beginning of the argumentative stage, a leaf in the woods, not caring at all, begins to color and break off and blow away. There is no struggle for a piece of fruit that is done and ripe and ready to fall. In a very blatant way, the men adopt the stance, "Death is the end of life; ah, why / Should life all labour be?" (Tennyson, 1842). This instance of personification, that was supposed to reveal a psychological fact, is actually a blatant argument that the sailors have inserted in nature. Of course, all this effort is well deserved for an exhausted crew that almost persuades the reader to support their cause.

4.3 The Stillness They Choose

Stillness acts as a turning point where stillness transitions from a description of the scenery to a description of the end of the action. "Hateful is the dark-blue sky, / Vaulted o'er the dark-blue sea." Sailors reminisce about their previous experiences of rolling "to starboard" and "to larboard" of the churning seas. "They've 'had enough of action, and of motion.'" They issue one final request to the brothers who sail the seas, saying "Surely, surely, slumber is more sweet than toil, the shore / Than labour in the deep mid-ocean, wind and wave and oar; / O, rest ye, brother mariners, we will not wander more" (Tennyson, 1842).

Listen to the very last line. It's long, and ends with a word that can be held. Throughout the poem the sounds are meant to create an almost rock-like motion, and the very last sound is one meant to create stillness.

Beneath everything else is the very subtle implication of loss. Like Mariana, the sailors of this poem have an inability to pinpoint the specific loss, which falls directly in line with Freud's melancholia: an inexplicable sorrow and despair, withdrawal from the outside world (Freud, 1917/1957). There are those who feel as though Buckley's early poems exemplify a young author's struggle with wanting to engage versus wanting to withdraw (Buckley, 1960). Yet there are still those who interpret the poems through a lens of irony as they describe how the sailors' words are continually met with visions of drowsiness instead of an attempt to persuade or win a point (Kincaid, 1975). In my opinion, everyone is partially right. While the poem offers an attractive invitation to give in to your temptations, it also exposes how that invitation really works.

V. Reading the Two Together

5.1 A Closed House, an Open Coast

Table 1 sets the two poems side by side on points you can check against the texts.

Table 1: "Mariana" and "The Lotos-Eaters" Compared

	"Mariana"	**"The Lotos-Eaters"**
First published	1830, *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*	1832 (dated 1833), *Poems*; heavily revised 1842
Source	Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*	Homer, *Odyssey*, Book 9
Form	Seven twelve-line stanzas (84 lines), rhymed *ababcddcefef*, with a refrain	Spenserian introduction; Choric Song in eight sections
Setting	Moated grange, flat fen country	Coastal valley, river, mountains
Time	One stuck day cycling through night and day	"Always afternoon"
Voice	Narrator; Mariana speaks only in the refrain	Narrator, then a collective "we"
Dominant senses	Small repeated household sounds; dim, gray sight	Soft music, falling water, warm light
Effect of sound	Underlines silence	Induces sleep
Ending	Wish to die	"We will not wander more"

Sources: Tennyson (1830, 1832, 1842); Ricks (1987); Shakespeare (1965); Homer (1996). The last three rows are the author's reading.

The first thing that jumps out is enclosure. Mariana is boxed in by a moat, a wall, a curtained casement, and a poplar that's the only tree for leagues. The sailors have the opposite: an open coast, a river running to the sea, mountains. Yet both groups end in the same inward stance. Why?

Because Tennyson's senses work as walls whichever way the geography runs. Mariana's are built from dimness and repetition. The sailors' are built from drowsiness. In both poems, what comes in through the senses is too thin or too sweet to make anyone act.

5.2 The Same Mood, Run Backwards

Take the two poems together and you will see they are mirror images. Sound breaks the stillness of "Mariana." Stillness breaks the sound of "The Lotos-Eaters." Mariana is desperate for things to happen. The sailors have everything going on and need stillness to rest. One poem deals with having nothing and wanting more. The other deals with having everything and being over saturated with sweetness.

Tennyson had his hand at it again and brightened "Mariana" a little more in 1832. He published "Mariana in the South," which basically is a copy and paste job of "Mariana," except instead of drowning in Northern cold, everything is shut out of the house because it's hot. Guess what. She still has the same ache, just in a different setting. That means the settings really don't matter as much as how he sets the scenes and how everything hits the senses.

VI. Why Small Details Carry the Weight

6.1 Melancholy as a Pleasure

Tennyson wouldn't be the first to suggest that sorrow is satisfying. Burton starts his Anatomy of Melancholy by reciting, "there's nothing so sweet as melancholy" (Burton, 1621/1989). Sailors know what I'm talking about, too. It's also one of the reasons for "Mariana" as a whole. One of the main reasons for reading both of these poems again is the sad and soothing nature of both. Sorrow has the capacity to companion someone.

6.2 The Ear Behind the Mood

Both Ricks and Hair spent time meticulously analyzing Tennyson's work, noting how particular his word selection was, but they both ended up at the same conclusion: the effectiveness of his poems relies on his careful choice of words. They cite the length and position of vowels in words like 'dreary' and 'aweary,' along with 'more' which also has an elongated vowel. Tennyson knows exactly what he's doing, and readers who ignore it won't see the depth in the poetry; instead, they'll have to come up with a plot that isn't even there to explain it.

Here is another experiment. Read the opening stanza of each poem, again, aloud, slowly. Note where the rhythm causes your voice to hurry and where it makes you hold a breath. Notice the effect that has. The first will force you to take in and hold a breath. The second will let you breathe out.

VII. Limits

There are boundaries. I view these works as artifacts, but a good deal lies beyond this framework. Sinfield (1986) analyzes Tennyson's early poems and the socio-economic burdens on a young gentleman. This is something I have intentionally excluded. I am also indebted to Freud. Freud has no reading of these works and his conception of mourning and melancholia has remained subject to debate. To me, it is an interpretation and not an observation. In this piece, I utilize the 1842 edition of Choric Song (Ricks, 1987). If you are one of those readers who is particularly obsessed with the original 1832 edition, then refer to the footnotes by Ricks.

The effect of a piece of work varies depending on who the reader is. There are those who, because they are impatient, would think the Choric Song is childish. There are others, who are emotionally impacted by grief, who would find "Mariana" to be emotionally excruciating. In the final analysis, poems are an assemblage of impressions, and every person brings their own meteorological conditions to a poem.

VIII. Conclusion

The methods are as simple as the poems. Tennyson places Mariana inside a room and allows very little to disturb the silence. This can include creaking, the buzzing of a fly, and the scurrying of a mouse. "The Lotos-Eaters" does the exact opposite. Tennyson lets loose the entire world of sounds to the audience. Falling streams of water and slow, soft music start to lull the audience. There is simply too much of a good thing in both poems. Too much silence versus too much noise. What is interesting is how the end result in both instances remains the same.

What really sticks out is how much is not explained. Who Mariana's lover was and what he meant to her is never revealed. The reasons why the sailors left the lotos eating people is slow and very tired. It seems the goal of the poet is to create a response in the reader. The reader is tasked with creating the emotional experience to supplement the poem. Arthur Hallam had a similar interpretation when it came to Tennyson's poetry. He considered him to be the "poet of sensation." When used effectively, this is the strength of the pathetic fallacy, which John Ruskin didn't like.

These poems also create a distinction of where a mood is placed. Moss in one context might mean comfort, whereas in another it means abandonment. It is in the context, rhythm and what is presented to the reader through the text, that the feeling of a poem is generated. Though it can't provide a clear rationale for the efficacy

of these poems, Freud's formulation of melancholia, the state of feeling a deep sorrow with an absent reason, is the right term for both poems.

These lines were written when Hallam was still alive, so do not let yourself fall into the trap of thinking they were written as an outlet of mourning. Hallam had a lot of sadness and craft. You can see it at the end of each poem. In Mariana's poem she says, "Oh, let me die." In The Sailor's Song, the sailor's say they won't wander any further. Both of these poems are sad, so when you are reading these, you have to be ready to end them. Tennyson will tempt you and leave it to you to determine the best next course of action.

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