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Grief in the Landscape: How Tennyson Uses Nature to Map Personal Loss in *In Memoriam*

Dr Upendra Kumar Soni
Lecture, Department of English
Mahamaya Government Degree College, Shrawasti

Abstract
Tennyson's In Memoriam A.H.H. was composed and published in 1850 following the 1833 sudden death of his best friend, Arthur Hallam. My goal in writing this paper is simple: why is so much of this work centered around trees, streams, weather, and the hills, and what significance does this have in the context of the poem's subject? The answer I put forth is that the natural elements throughout this poem represent stages of the poet's grief. Initially, the environment and natural world of the poem reflect his feelings of numbness, with features including storms and the blank spaces of city streets. Later in the poem, however, with the development of modern science and early ideas on the theories of evolution and the ideas that the natural world cares little for the individual, the previously depicted elements of nature and the environment become uncaring and even cruel. The final sections of the poem show a more healing and optimistic side to the natural world. My reading and analysis incorporate and contextualize this work with theories and ideas including Ruskin's pathetic fallacy, Freud's theories of mourning and attachment, and the bereavement theories put forward by Stroebe and Schut. I believe my analysis demonstrates that the poem and Tennyson's representations of nature and the environment show how grief, particularly that relating to the loss of a friend and partner, is circular rather than linear and show how grief does not move steadily from a point of despair and misery towards peace and resolution. These shifting representations mirror the cycles of bereavement and the loss theories described by bereavement researchers. My analysis is accompanied by a number of figures and a table, all illustrating aspects of my reading and the theories of loss that I utilize, and show the structure of Hallam's body as represented throughout the poem, the poem's structure on the anniversaries of Hallam's death, and the various locations that Hallam's body traveled to.

Keywords: *Tennyson, In Memoriam, elegy, grief and mourning, nature and landscape, Victorian poetry*

I. Introduction

1.1 A Poem That Won't Stay Indoors

Look closely at almost any page in In Memoriam and you'll find a figure outdoors. Sometimes a person observes a body of water. Maybe a figure views a storm or watches the last few scraps of snow disappear from a field. Always the subject of In Memoriam is death. Mostly, the poem relies on description of its natural scenery.

Stop to think, and you'll realize how strange that is. You would expect descriptions and anecdotes to fill out an elegy. And sure, Tennyson provides that. However, much more often, he uses the poem to detail the weather. Hallam is the person of whom he is writing, yet he only manifests as a shadow, a ghostly outline, and a breeze. In the same way, the grief of the poet manifests as various natural scenes: the graveyard yew tree, the tidal stream, the dark night lawn, the hill above the home of the family.

I've interpreted this work along those lines. I've seen nature as a map of the process of grieving. Where Tennyson stood in terms of his grief is manifested as each part of the natural world of the poem. Each natural world is also representative of how he has shifted, how he has advanced along his journey. Grief is a mental process, and like most processes, it is nonlinear, and can shift suddenly and significantly. This has traditionally been seen as a sign of confusion. When interpreted this way, this poem is actually very structured and deliberate. He knows exactly where he has been and he knows exactly where he wants to go.

1.2 Scope and Method

To start, let's go over some fundamentals. Tennyson's In Memoriam (1850) contains a prologue, 131 numbered sections, and an epilogue, with four-line stanzas, eight-syllable lines, and abba rhyme schemes. Sections were composed out of order and took Tennyson around seventeen years to complete (Martin, 1980; Shatto & Shaw, 1982). Thus, In Memoriam is an arranged experience as opposed to a journal entry.

I will utilize close reading to look at how specific landscapes are presented throughout the work, and examine the poem alongside contemporary theories on bereavement. Though Freud, Bowlby, and Stroebe and Schut

likely did not influence Tennyson, these scholars provide structure for understanding patterns Tennyson enacted through the work.

In Memoriam has been an instant hit since it was first published, and its positive reviews in its time have led it to become a household poem of bereavement. Its primary value is for its original purpose: comfort in times of grief. Queen Victoria thought it so important that it was second only to the Bible as a resource in comforting her after the death of Prince Albert (Tennyson, 1897).

II. Background

2.1 Hallam, Cambridge, and a Long Delay

Tennyson (Martin, 1980) was born in Somersby in 1809 and his father was the rector. Tennyson was friends with Hallam while studying at Cambridge. Hallam, who was brilliant and likeable, became engaged to Emily, Tennyson's sister. The engagement deepened their friendship by merging their families.

Hallam was the first to positively review and analyze Tennyson's earlier poetry (Hallam, 1831). He analyzed the young poet's gift of 'sensation' or 'imagery.' The poet had an extraordinary way of putting feeling through the line with words that carried sound and color.

A friend of a poet that put feelings in words that conveyed imagery would never be the one to write an elegy with abstract ideas.

On the 15th of September 1833, Hallam suddenly died. Hallam was in his twenties and had an aneurysm at the young age of twenty-two while he was on the road with his father (Martin, 1980). Hallam's final place of rest was the burial site of his family at Clevedon near the Bristol Channel on January 3rd, 1834 (Martin, 1980). It was after the burial of Hallam that the twenty-four year old Tennyson began to write. This period of time was filled with Tennyson's incessant writing of poems which spanned from the death of Hallam in 1833 through the year 1849.

Tennyson published the work without naming himself in 1850 and in June of that year, he married Emily Sellwood and subsequently accepted the position of Poet Laureate of the country later in that year (Martin, 1980). In one of his sons' recordings, Tennyson was quoted as having described the 'I' in the poem as representing the voice of the entire human species rather than his individual perspective alone (Tennyson, 1897). The author's claim is evident in the private and at the same time shared quality of the descriptions in the poem.

2.2 Two Ways of Seeing Nature

Tennyson inherited a Romantic propensity. In the Romantic tradition, particularly in the case of Wordsworth and Coleridge, the focus became to put the education of the sentiments within the realm of the outside world, so that for instance, a mountain or a stream could inform one of his own mind (Wordsworth and Coleridge 1798). Thus, Hallam's commendation of sensation sits within this context. For him, the natural world is kind, or at least amenable.

However, the field of geology caused problems for this line of thinking. In his work, Principles of Geology, which was published between 1830 and 1833, Charles Lyell explained that the natural world has been and is currently being shaped by forces which are relatively slow. For these reasons, he felt that the length of the earth's history was outside the reach of the understanding of even the greatest men (Lyell 1830-1833). Finally, with his anonymously written Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation, which was published in 1844, Robert Chambers brought this same argument down to the living (Chambers 1844). With the publication of On the Origin of Species by Natural Selection in 1859, a mere nine years after the publication of In Memoriam, Charles Darwin articulated this line of reasoning most cogently (Darwin 1859). However, Tennyson did reach these conclusions prior to Darwin, and even prior to Lyell, which is reflected in his poetry (Buckley 1966).

Ruskin coined a term for when a poet imbues the natural world with the feelings of mankind. In his work Modern Painters, he called this the pathetic fallacy and characterized this as an imbalance of a mind of great feeling, while acknowledging that even great poets use it (Ruskin 1856). Tennyson utilizes it very frequently. His brilliance lies in the fact that he is aware of the situation. His poetry contains this fallacy while at the same time opposing it. This was perfectly appropriate for an age during which questions related to the conflict of faith and science and the function of poetry were addressed by the use of verse (Armstrong 1993).

III. Landscape as Mirror: The First Year of Grief

3.1 The Yew and the Blank Day

The poem begins with a churchyard scene. In section 2 the speaker observes an old yew tree whose roots grow around the graves of those it holds and its branches grow across the headstones. The speaker wishes he were the yew tree as seasons go by and it stays dark and sullen as the elements of the sun and gale pass through it. The speaker feels that while he watches it, he feels that he leaves his own blood and is integrated with it.

Imagine what the speaker is asking for. It isn't comfort, or even exactly death. The speaker is wishing for the loss of the ability to feel through transforming into something that cannot feel. That's a good wish for early grief. The first stage of grief, as described by Bowlby in 1980, is the numbing phase in which a bereaved person gets through the day feeling partly sedated. A yew tree is a good symbol for this stage of grief.

Section 7 is similar but with a city setting. The poem speaker stands outside Hallam's old London home, now the "dark house," and toward the end, dawn finally breaks over "the bald street" as a "blank day." Nature is void, leaving him with nothing, and the poem's setting is void, too.

Section 11 is less conventional. There's a wonderful morning; there is dew on the gorse, and the autumn colours have started to paint the leaves, and beyond lies the broad open coastline. In it he names his own internal silence a 'calm despair' (Tennyson 1850). The mirroring technique becomes more complex, because the external conditions of the world are now the opposite of the internal condition he experiences, and the opposition serves a purpose. Everything outside is perfectly tranquil and still, yet he cannot enter it. In that moment of intense longing and deep sorrow, grief really can seem like this: a day as fine and beautiful as it can be, only makes you want to turn against it in anger.

3.2 The Ship and the Rising Wind

The voyage poems consist of Sections 9-17. In the poems, the speaker visualizes the vessel containing Hallam's body moving along the sea as the speaker stands along the coast. He starts off by wishing the ship a calm and safe journey. Tennyson (1850) says "Fair ship" (Section 9) and comments on how the "placid ocean-plains" are safe for a ship. The calmness remains until section 11. However, by section 15 the winds increase, the trees break, and cattle huddle in the fields. Finally, the last red leaf of the season blows away. (Tennyson, 1850, section 15). Finally, by section 17 the speaker gives his thanks to the breeze which helped to bring the ship back to port.

The calm of Section 11, the storm of Section 15, and the prayer that is finally answered in Section 17 is how it should be. The speaker understands the disorder that is associated with grief. It should come as no surprise to the reader that the poem reflects that disorder. It was only after Stroebe and Schut (1999) proposed the dual process model that the disorder that grief should encompass was acknowledged. People that have lost a loved one should not be expected to march in a linear manner towards grief. They must have the ability to oscillate back and forth between grief and their life of every day. During this period of oscillation the bereaved person is essentially beginning to cope with their grief. It seems that this poem describes a mental forecast of the speaker's emotional state.

3.3 Where the River Meets the Tide

Section 19 is the cleanest case of landscape doing emotional work. Hallam's body reaches Clevedon, laid by the shore "in the hearing of the wave." Then Tennyson sets the Severn's tide against the little river Wye. Twice a day the salt water pushes in, hushes "half the babbling Wye," and makes "a silence in the hills" (Tennyson, 1850, section 19).

Look at how little he says about himself. He doesn't write "I feel silenced." The river does the saying. A few lines later the tide runs out, the Wye finds its voice, and so does he: "And I can speak a little then." His grief has a tide, and twice a day it comes and goes.

Ruskin would flag this as the pathetic fallacy, and fair enough. But very little of it is false. The Wye really does go quiet when the Severn's tide backs up into it. Tennyson isn't inventing weather to fit a mood. He's picking, from what the real place offers, the thing that fits. As shown in Figure 1, the route of Hallam's body lines up with the poem's first big run of landscape sections.

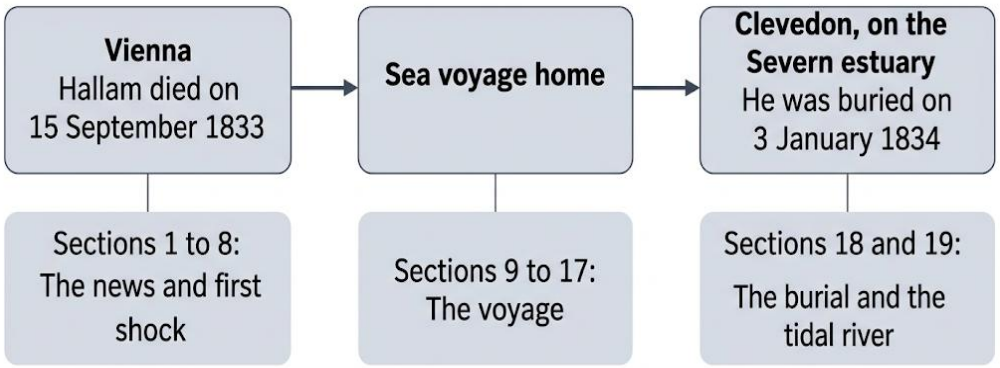


Figure 1: Hallam's Journey from Vienna to Clevedon, Matched to the Poem's Opening Sections

This flow diagram goes through three stages: the place Hallam died, Vienna, then the journey on the sea to Clevedon. Clevedon is at the edge of the river, the Severn, and this is where Hallam was buried. Sections of poems from 1-8 are placed under the location of Vienna to deal with the announcement and the initial trauma. Poems sections 9-17 cover the sea voyage, and poem sections 18-19 concern the burial and the tide. This helps show that early on, Tennyson's work did have a defined route. It makes the geography of the work follow the physical return of his body. Dates were referenced from Martin in 1980, and groupings of sections of his poems from 1850 were used by Tennyson.

IV. When Nature Turns Indifferent

4.1 Fossils and Cliffs

Around the 54th section of the poem, the setting shifts. Earlier, the world would mirror, soothe, or simply ignore the speaker. Now it begins to threaten him. Section 55 asks if nature has any interest in individuals, and Section 56 provides an answer. The answer is "she seems 'so careful of the type,' but when he looks at the evidence he finds the opposite: 'From scarped cliff and quarried stone / She cries, 'A thousand types are gone: / I care for nothing, all shall go'" (Tennyson, 1850, section 56).

Those cliffs and quarries belong to Lyell. Rock faces held entire layers of fossils, where extinct species and whole creatures were fossilized. It fell to Lyell's readers to deduce the implications (Lyell, 1830–1833; Buckley, 1966). Tennyson personifies fossils. Nature is "red in tooth and claw" and "dragons of the prime tare each other in their slime." You would not choose to step into such a world.

Observe the timeline. Darwin's book would be released in nine years and Tennyson had captured the nightmare in its pages. Perhaps this is one of the reasons his work is referred to as "prophetic". However, the work is not about science. It is a work about grief. What possibility is there for a man of Cambridge to leave a mark when thousand species go extinct without any one of them being mourned? Lyell's geology brings a personal loss onto the world.

What's striking is how Tennyson answers it. No triumph. At the end of section 55, just before the fossils, he stretches "lame hands of faith" and says he "faintly" trusts "the larger hope" (Tennyson, 1850, section 55). Faith here isn't a victory over the landscape. It's what's left when the landscape stops cooperating. I find that more convincing than a neat resolution would have been.

4.2 What the Cold Landscape Does for Grief

Freud, writing in 1917, saw mourning as slow, painful work. The mourner tests reality, finds the loved one gone, and gradually pulls emotional energy back from the dead (Freud, 1917/1957). Section 56 is a stretch of that work done with the lights off. The speaker looks straight at the fact that death is ordinary and that nature's ledger has no column for his friend. He doesn't flinch.

The poem refuses the second half of Freud's job, though. Tennyson doesn't detach. He keeps talking to Hallam for another 75 sections. Bowlby's (1980) account of what follows yearning, a phase of disorganization and despair, fits the middle of the poem well, but the sections that follow 56 plead for faith again instead of settling into despair. Table 1 sets out the main landscapes by section so you can see the whole map at a glance.

Table 1: Selected Landscapes in *In Memoriam* and the Mood Each Carries

Section	Landscape	Emotional register
2	Churchyard yew	Envy of the dead; wish to stop feeling
7	Bald city street at dawn	Numbness; nowhere to turn
11	Calm autumn morning, plain and sea	"Calm despair"
15	Rising wind and storm	Wild unrest
19	Tidal Severn and the Wye	Silence, then speech returning
56	Cliffs, quarries, fossils	Terror of indifference
72	Stormy dawn on the anniversary	Raw, repeated shock
99	Dawn full of birds and herds	Loosening; life going on
115	Last snow, spring buds	Tentative renewal
130	Rolling air, rising and setting sun	Presence in all things

Source: Tennyson (1850). Mood readings are the author's, informed by Bradley (1910).

V. Seasons and Anniversaries: Grief in Loops

5.1 Three Christmases and Two Dawns

Tennyson hangs the middle of the poem on the calendar. Three Christmases (sections 28, 78, and 104) and two anniversaries of Hallam's death (72 and 99) work like fence posts, and at each one the landscape tells you how far he's come (Tennyson, 1850). As shown in Figure 2, they're spread unevenly across the sequence.

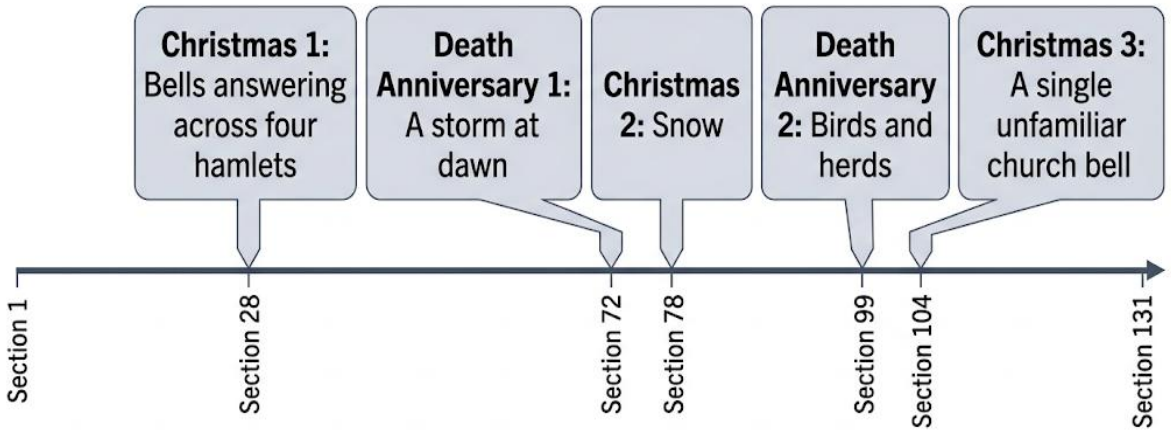


Figure 2: Anniversary Markers in *In Memoriam*: Where the Three Christmases and Two Death Anniversaries Fall in the 131 Sections

This timeline runs along a horizontal line from section 1 to section 131. Five markers sit on it: Christmas at sections 28, 78, and 104, and the anniversary of Hallam's death at sections 72 and 99. Each marker carries a short note on the scenery: bells answering across four hamlets at 28, snow at 78, a storm at dawn at 72, birds and herds at 99, and a single unfamiliar church bell at 104. The takeaway is that the poem's calendar is uneven, but every marker records a change in the surrounding landscape. Section numbers and imagery from Tennyson (1850).

Sections 72 and 99 are the pair I'd teach if I could only teach two. Both open with the same line, "Risest thou thus, dim dawn, again." Both address the morning of the day Hallam died. In 72 that morning comes in howling, with blasts that blow the poplar white and storm lashing the window. In 99 it's loud with the voices of birds and the lowing of herds (Tennyson, 1850, sections 72, 99).

The date hasn't changed. The sky has, and Tennyson means us to see why. The first anniversary arrives as an assault. The second arrives with ordinary country noise, a day that's allowed to be alive. The speaker still hurts. But the world has stopped shouting about it.

5.2 The Bells

Bells give the Christmas sections their texture. In section 28 the speaker hears four hamlets' bells answering each other across the country, and it feels as if a door has been shut between him and the sound. In section 78 snow covers the ground and the family plays its old Christmas games. He asks whether grief can shrink at all: "O last regret, regret can die!" The answer is closer to "slowly," because "with long use her tears are dry" (Tennyson, 1850, section 78).

By section 104 the family has moved. One church bell, "folded in the mist," rings out among strangers, and it wakes a murmur in his breast "that these are not the bells I know" (Tennyson, 1850, section 104). He's grieving two things now, Hallam and Somersby. Moving house doesn't ease grief. It lays a second loss on top of the first.

5.3 A Spiral, Not a Line

Put these markers together and you get a spiral. Stroebe and Schut (1999) would call it oscillation. Loss-oriented moments, when the speaker stares straight at the death, alternate with restoration-oriented ones, when he visits, argues, and carries on. Bowlby's (1980) phases overlap in the same way. Tennyson's stanza helps. The *abba* rhyme folds back on itself, so every four lines end near where they began (Ricks, 1989; Culler, 1977). Form and landscape make the same motion. Each stanza circles, and each season comes around again.

This is where I part ways with readers who treat *In Memoriam* as a recovery story. It's tempting. The poem begins in despair and ends at a wedding. But the structure doesn't support a clean arc. Spring arrives in section 115 and the speaker is still wrestling with doubt in 124. The consolation is real, but he earns it over and over and never quite holds it.

VI. The Return of the Landscape as Presence

6.1 The Hill above Somersby

As the poem moves on, it starts to reclaim the old countryside. In section 100 the speaker climbs a hill, looks over all the land below, and finds "no place that does not breathe / Some gracious memory of my friend" (Tennyson, 1850, section 100). The grange, the fold, the stile, the sheep-walk each hold something of Hallam.

This is the reverse of the yew. In section 2, nature was dead and he wanted to join it. Here it's alive with memory.

That matters psychologically. A landscape full of memories lets the mourner keep the dead near without pretending they're alive. Freud thought the mourner had to let go (Freud, 1917/1957). Tennyson's hill suggests another option: the loved one becomes part of the place, and the place keeps. Bowlby (1980) noted how common a sense of the dead person's presence is among the bereaved, and he didn't treat it as pathology.

6.2 The Lawn at Night

Section 95 is the high point. One summer night the speaker reads Hallam's old letters on the lawn. "The dead man touch'd me from the past," he writes, and for a moment the "living soul was flash'd on mine" (Tennyson, 1850, section 95). The trance doesn't last. What brings him out of it is the landscape: pale cattle glimmering in the dusk, trees laying their "dark arms about the field," a breeze moving through the sycamore. Then dawn comes, "boundless day."

Notice the order. Nature doesn't deliver the vision. The letters do. Nature receives him afterward, steadies him, and walks him back into ordinary light. Tennyson trusts the countryside as a place to land.

6.3 The Voice on the Rolling Air

Section 130 goes furthest. Hallam's voice "is on the rolling air." The speaker hears him where the waters run and sees him in the rising and setting sun. It sounds like pantheism, and Tennyson pulls back at once. He can't say what the presence is. Even if he seems to feel "some diffusive power" in star and flower, "I do not therefore love thee less" (Tennyson, 1850, section 130).

The same fields that frightened him in section 56 now carry the person he lost. Nothing in the geology has changed. The relationship has. Early on, he projected numbness onto things. Midway, he found that things cared nothing for him. By the end he has learned to hold both: the world is indifferent and also full of the dead man's traces. That's a more grown-up position than comfort.

6.4 The Epilogue

The epilogue takes everything out into open air. It marks the 1842 marriage of Tennyson's sister Cecilia to Edmund Lushington (Martin, 1980), and the poem closes on a wedding and a hope that all creation moves toward "one far-off divine event" (Tennyson, 1850, epilogue). One detail pleased me when I first noticed it. The word "type," which nature crushed in section 56, comes back as a compliment. Hallam is "a noble type / Appearing ere the times were ripe." The species that nature wouldn't protect has become a promise.

VII. Limits and Afterlife

7.1 What the Map Leaves Out

No map covers everything. Hallam himself is oddly hard to see. For all the places, we get few of his actual jokes, habits, or arguments. A reader who wants a portrait may feel cheated. The poem seems to know it. A friend who died at 22 can't be completed by memory, only surrounded. Sinfield (1986) reads the poem against the social pressures on Victorian men of Tennyson's class, and that context adds a layer I haven't tried to cover.

The grief-theory comparison has limits too. Freud, Bowlby, and Stroebe and Schut write about real people. Tennyson writes a speaker, and the speaker is a made thing. I've used the clinical work as a set of lenses, not as proof. Religion matters as well. The late landscapes console partly because Tennyson believes, hard and shakily, in something beyond them. Readers without that belief may find the comfort thinner.

7.2 Why It Still Lands

Plenty of readers today don't share Victorian faith and still go back to the poem after a death. I think that's because it doesn't lie about weather. A cheerful sky on the worst day of your life feels like an insult, and Tennyson says so. A storm on a quiet anniversary feels like understanding, and he says that too. Bradley's commentary (1910), still worth reading, goes through the poem section by section, and the habit pays off, because the landscapes turn out to be the plot.

VIII. Conclusion

Tennyson wrote a poem about grief in an outdoor setting and used nature to symbolize different stages of the grieving process. He uses the numbness represented by the yew tree. A wind starts to pick up and shows the unsteadiness of the beginning of the grieving process. The grieving process, the rising and falling of the tide in the Severn, also demonstrates that grief is both unpredictable and predictable. Fossils and excavated quarries exemplify the indifference of the universe as one loses someone else. Finally, Somersby’s Hills and the voice in the air, along with the nighttime yard, demonstrate that loved ones return to this world not in spirit but as characteristics of their surroundings.

The most important takeaway for a new reader is that grief isn't linear. It doesn't proceed neatly. After one year, we experience the dawn again. Two years pass and two more sets of Christmas carols are heard. Finally, we reach spring in Section 115 and by 124, there's still more uncertainty. This oscillating state of mind is normal and expected when one is grieving, but I hadn't known until now that research on grief confirmed this (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Tennyson had it down.

And does the comfort come off as convincing? Usually, I'd say yes. Because nature has the option of remaining cruel for extended periods before giving any sort of comfort. Even then, consolation is only half of it. It's an enlarged, albeit fragile, hope. It probably hits the right chord for everyone else who has spent a day standing in the middle of a brightly lit field feeling that their world has fallen to shambles.

In Memoriam provides grief with a physical world. In the form of a hand-drawn map, it's brutally honest in the areas where the trails dead end.

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