**Poems from 'In Memoriam'**

Some of Tennyson’s short poems are little more than thoughts, observations or wise sayings.   Although we often advise against seeing a poem as a kind of code to be unlocked, sometimes that is something we have to do – especially if the culture and the language, including word order, is unfamiliar.

The intellectual and personal culture from within which Tennyson is writing is unlikely to be familiar to the average sixth former. Terms taken for granted at the time of writing, like Nature and Soul, also need careful thought.

Then there is the difficulty wrought simply by putting these thoughts into verse form, with the effect it has on word order and syntax generally.  Bearing all this in mind, I think it reasonable that students might want some kind of ‘translation’.

How to do this, without doing it for them?   Here's a suggestion based around 'I sometimes hold it half a sin'. (See below 1)

I've applied the same technique to ['Dark House, by which once more I stand',](http://www.teachit.co.uk/user_content/satellites/2/Tennyson/Tennyson%20Dark%20house.doc) (below 2) hoping that students can then have ago at some of the other poems themselves.  The final suggestions involve transforming the original...gradually...into a modern song lyric.

And there's one I've really taken a few liberties with: ['I envy not in any moods...'](http://www.teachit.co.uk/user_content/satellites/2/Tennyson/From%20Tennyson%20to%20Tenny%20Song.doc)  Any musicians out there who can add the music? (Separate file ‘I envy not’)

Taking a slightly different tack, I have turned ['I climb the hill: from end to end'](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5CUser%5CDocuments%5CNATE%5CNew%20Poetry%20Resources%5Cpoetryplace%5Cuser_content%5Csatellites%5C2%5CTennyson%5CTennyson%20Immersed.doc)into an 'immersed text' (below 3) which I hope gives the sense of the poem without having to laboriously explain it. The underlying message isn't difficult to grasp and the vocabulary is very simple. I have omitted a few instances of 'or' and 'nor' but otherwise the complete text is there, within the prose.  It may be helpful for students to just read it / have it read to them and then read the poem. What is gained / lost in the prose version?

**1 'I sometimes hold it half a sin'.**

This is a suggestion. Adapt it to suit your situation. Model this approach with students the first time. Next time, get them to work on it in pairs. They will need word processors.

Firstly, rearrange the lines so that they read like sentences, not verse:

I sometimes hold it half a sin to put in words the grief I feel; for words, like Nature, half reveal and half conceal the Soul within.

But, for the unquiet heart and brain, a use in measured language lies; the sad mechanic exercise, like dull narcotics, numbing pain.

In words, like weeds, I'll wrap me o'er, like coarsest clothes against the cold: but that large grief which these enfold is given in outline and no more.

Second, start to replace words which are unclear with words that are more straightforward and alter word order so that the sentences are easier to understand.

I sometimes think it’s rather a sin to put the grief I feel into words; for words, like Nature, half reveal and half conceal the Soul within us.

But, for someone with a disturbed heart and brain, there is a use in measured language; the mechanical exercise, like dull narcotics, numbs the pain.

So, I'll wrap myself in words, like weeds, in fact like the thickest clothes to keep out the cold. In this way the grief which these clothes cover will show just in outline and no more.

Thirdly, use ‘Insert Comment’ to do just that: add other helpful explanations, or questions/suggestions. The advantage of using Insert Comment is that it feels more hesitant than a proper written out statement and can encourage students to ask questions, offer theories, be unsure.

For example



**2. Dark house, by which once more I stand**

Dark house, by which once more I stand

Here in the long unlovely street,

Doors, where my heart was used to beat

So quickly, waiting for a hand,

A hand that can be clasp'd no more?

Behold me, for I cannot sleep,

And like a guilty thing I creep

At earliest morning to the door.

He is not here; but far away

The noise of life begins again,

And ghastly thro' the drizzling rain

On the bald street breaks the blank day.

Step One

Dark house, by which once more I stand here in the long unlovely street, doors, where my heart was used to beat so quickly, waiting for a hand, a hand that can be clasped no more?

Behold me, for I cannot sleep, and like a guilty thing I creep at earliest morning to the door.

He is not here; but far away the noise of life begins again, and ghastly through the drizzling rain on the bald street breaks the blank day.

Step Two

Let’s try to make this a little clearer.

**Dark house** (by which once more I stand here in the long unlovely street); **doors** (where my heart was used to beat so quickly, waiting for a hand, a hand that can be clasped no more), **behold me** - for I cannot sleep, and like a guilty thing I creep at earliest morning to the door.

I’ve altered the punctuation too, because the first sentence of the poem seems to have no clear verb. This way the poet is calling to the house (and its doors) to behold him. “Look at me – here I am in the street, skulking like a criminal, lonely and miserable!”

Then, if we separate the next clause completely, it makes the feelings more obvious:

**He is not here**.

But **far away the noise of life begins again**, and the blank day breaks, ghastly through the drizzling rain, on the bald street.

Extension one

Notice how Tennyson likes to qualify some of the important nouns in great detail, and then do the same again to the nouns which occur in his qualification. Thus, the house:

**House**

* dark
* by which he stands once more
* in the **street**
	+ long
	+ unlovely

**Doors**

* where his **heart**
	+ used to beat so quickly,
* where he waited for a **hand**,
	+ that can be clasped no more

Extension Two

Finally, although it seems to be from so long ago, just imagine the last verse written like this:

He is not here

but far away

the noise of life

begins again

and the blank day

breaks

ghastly

through the drizzling rain

on the bald street

And it could be written yesterday. Perhaps, with some repeats, it could be a song…

He is not here

But far away.

Far away,

The noise of life

Begins again;

Far away

The blank day

Breaks ghastly

Through the drizzling rain

On the bald street,

Far far away.

Students might like to try turning the first two verses into lyrics – a little judicious editing is permitted, of course.

Now ask students to have a go at some of the above techniques on other short poems, or parts of poems, ideally working in pairs.

**3. Immersed Tennyson: 'I climb the hill: from end to end'**

As I climb the hill I find myself once more thinking of my good friend: my companion whose sudden death I find so hard to bear. Gazing into the valley, I look from end to end: it is a lovely view. But, of all the landscape underneath me, I can find nowehere – no place that does not, in some way, breathe some reminder, some gracious memory of my friend.

No. I cannot look upon the grey old grange, or that lonely fold enclosing docile sheep or even that low morass of land with its marshy edges and whispering reeds, without thinking of him. I look at the simple stile leading from one mead to another grassy mead, or at the sheepwalk that curves up the windy wold and feel the same chill in my heart.

Nor does the sight of all this natural beauty seem to help.

I can see a hoary knoll of ash and hawthorn that houses so many songbirds and where one hears the latest-born linnet trill; I can just make out the stone quarry deeply trenched along the side of the hill and hear that it’s still haunted by the noise of the wrangling jackdaws. I hear, too, the runlet tinkling from the rock which feeds into the pastoral rivulet that swerves to left and right through the meadowy curves further along the valley: the clear water that feeds the mothers of the flock of lambs.

I see and hear all these things but I know each has pleased a kindred eye, the eye of my dear friend. And each of these sights and sounds reflects the past - and reminds me of a kindlier, happier day.

And so, leaving all these, to pass away from them as he has passed away, I think once more he seems to die all over again and there is no solace to be found.

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