

1-1-1964

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Recommended Citation

Smith, C. A. (1964). In Memoriam, J.F.K.. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 4 (2). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol4/iss2/2

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IN MEMORIAM, J. F. K.

Charles Allen Smith

Western Michigan University

Two thousand years ago a man who called himself Koheleth said in the book of Ecclesiastes: "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven." What happened in Dallas this afternoon makes it impossible for us to go about our business in the ordinary way.

Nothing that can be said will mitigate the shock or soothe the grief we feel. I suppose we must all take refuge at last in the words quoted by Abraham Lincoln in the Second Inaugural: "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

In thinking about three things which are close to this group this evening—our love for President Kennedy, death and what it means, and the brotherhood which fraternities and sororities stand for—I have been thinking about a nineteenth century English poet, Alfred Tennyson.

Tennyson had a very close friend. His name was Arthur Henry Hallam. He was the son of a great English historian. Tennyson loved Hallam deeply. In fact, he said of Hallam that he was "more than my brothers are to me." And then, while still a young man, Hallam died. Tennyson was heartbroken. He went through an agony of grief, and out of this agony he wrote a great poem. "In Memoriam, A. H. H." It is a long poem made up of many short lyrics, and it tells the story of Tennyson's pilgrimage through the valley of despair.

At first, Tennyson says, he was resolved that he would grieve forever. It were better, he says, "to dance with death and beat the ground" than that the victor hours should say, "Behold the man that loved and lost, and all he was over-worn!"

But in his pilgrimage through grief Tennyson found that this, to the normal man, is impossible. No normal person can dance with death and beat the ground forever. Eventually he came out upon a more wholesome plateau where he could take a solemn pleasure in the fact that he had had the opportunity for such a friendship, even though he must lose his friend.

(Taken from a speech delivered impromptu to the Mid-American Pan-Hellenic, Interfraternity Council Conference on that infamous day, November 22, 1963.)

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.

But this was not the brightest plateau that Tennyson attained to. At last he came to the happiest conclusion of all—the solid assurance that he had not lost his friend. His friend would be with him forever.

Thy voice is on the rolling air.
 I hear thee where the waters run.
 Thou standest in the rising sun,
 And in the setting thou art fair.

What art thou then? I cannot guess.
 But though I seem, through storm and shower,
 To feel thee, some diffusive power,
 I do not therefore love thee less.

My love involves the love before.
 My love is vaster passion now.
 Though mixed with God and Nature thou,
 I seem to love thee more and more.

Far off thou art, yet ever nigh.
 I have thee still, and I rejoice.
 I prosper, circled by thy voice.
 I cannot lose thee though I die.

John F. Kennedy has left us many things of himself that will never die. He was—and this should be of especial importance to us all—a symbol of youth and its leadership. He wasn't the youngest president we have ever had—I think he was next to the youngest—but with his bright grin and his touseled hair he looked like the image of youth and its promise.

He was a symbol of courage. Back in the eighteenth century a poet named Thomas Gray in his "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" said:

Full many a gem of purest ray serene
 The dark, unfathomed caves of ocean bear.
 Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
 And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

This may be splendid poetry, but, in my opinion, it is poor philosophy. Gray was looking at the graves of the poor illiterate

peasants in the cemetery of the little English village of Stoke Poges, and he was thinking of what some of these poor illiterate peasants might have been if they “had had a chance.” Here, he says, is perhaps “a mute, inglorious Milton”; there is “a Cromwell, guiltless of his country’s blood.”

I do not believe there are any “mute, inglorious Miltons” in the cemetery at Stoke Poges. The trouble with Gray’s philosophy is that part of being a Milton is functioning as a Milton. Gray is asking, “What chance did these poor, illiterate peasants have?” I would answer: What chance did Milton—blind, bereft and disillusioned—have? What chance did Abraham Lincoln have? What chance did John F. Kennedy have?

President Kennedy grew up in a Massachusetts which was still used to seeing in its store windows the signs which read: “Help wanted. No Irish need apply.” He was permanently injured, physically, as a youth. His health was shattered during the war. He belonged to the wrong religion for him ever to become president of the United States, according to all our history. And, perhaps the greatest disability of all, he was born to fantastic wealth. But he became president. He was, and will always remain with us, a symbol of courage.

This is a time when we are liable to feel crushed by the problems which we face. We are liable to think that the threats which hang over our heads are greater than anyone has ever known before. In this connection I should like to quote a part of an editorial which appeared in *The Kalamazoo Gazette*, a Michigan daily newspaper. This editorial is describing the state of the world, and here is just a brief selection from it.

The last age was the age of the maritime supremacy of Great Britain. The present is that of the extension of power by land. In the New World, as in the Old, any one must be struck by the singular parallelism at present exhibited by the two great rising Powers of either hemisphere. Russia, the great military power of the Old World, has of late been rapidly extending her frontiers. North, south, east, and west simultaneously has she been pushing forward her outposts. Finland, Poland, Bessarabia, and the Persian provinces have felt her appropriating hand; and now she is mustering the whole forces of her immense empire, with the daring project of marching over the crumbling empires of the East, and of bidding defiance to the banded strength of Western Europe. In the New World the United States has been progressing in a similar manner, though in a different spirit. Russia conquers by her massive battalions and her Machiavellian

diplomacy, America by her roving pioneers of civilization. Thus the great despotic Power of the Old World, and the great democratic one of the New are embarked on a career of conquest.

The reason I wanted to quote this is that it is a part of an editorial which appeared in *The Kalamazoo Gazette* for a day in April in the year 1854—one hundred and nine years ago! I think you will agree that it is a pretty accurate summation of what we think of as the great threat that hangs over our heads today. Even our gravest crises have been lived through before. There is comfort in the words of an unknown Anglo-Saxon poet of fifteen hundred years ago: "That was o'erpassed. This will pass also."

In this hour we must firmly admonish ourselves that it is easy to hate, and often, as now, it is hard to love. The death of John F. Kennedy should dedicate us with new zeal to the ideals he lived and the good things he left us. This would be the working out of the ancient concept of victory in death—which is the symbolism of the Christian cross.

And now we must accept what is, at this moment, the hardest truth of all: The world belongs to the living.

Charles Allen Smith, an associate professor at Western Michigan University, wrote the script for a color movie which won a national citation for industrial films in 1960. His weekly radio show was selected for a national award as one of the top ten in its class in radio and television. He is co-author of "The Metropolitan Transportation Dilemma," published by the Society of Automotive Engineers. Mr. Smith is also a popular after dinner speaker.