

Teaching “In Memoriam”

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Before Reading: **Maturity Alert: This story contains an implied sex scene.**

Teaching genres. It can be helpful to discuss the difference between science fiction and fantasy. One useful distinction is that science fiction stories contain an element or elements that do not exist in our world but are scientifically possible. Fantasy stories contain an element or elements that do not exist on our world and do not appear scientifically possible. Space ships that travel to other planets are scientifically possible while magic is not. A class exercise that can be done quickly is to have the students create a list of films they are familiar with and classify them as science fiction or fantasy. You may find a spirited debate about films that straddle the line, like some of the Marvel Comics films that contain some elements that appear science fictional and some that are supernatural. After reading, students can decide if “In Memoriam” is a science fiction or fantasy.

Discussing themes: Another approach that can get the students involved with the story is to discuss or have students journal on some of the story’s elements or thematic topics before they read. Some questions that can be fruitful include these:

- If you have been to a cemetery before, how did it make you feel?
- What are purposes of a cemetery for the living?
- Do you believe ghosts are real?
- Why have ghost stories been so popular for so long?
- Who is Edgar Allan Poe and what connection does he have to stories about cemeteries and ghosts?
- Do you believe in love at first sight?
- Do you believe that love can transcend death?

Introducing vocabulary: One approach to vocabulary is to ask students to note words they either are unfamiliar with or find interesting as they read. Asking student to find ten words that fall into those two categories can help them focus more closely on the text.

Another approach is to identify words in the story you believe might trip students up and pre-teach them. The vocabulary in “In Memoriam” should not be difficult for an average middle or high school student. Words for students with weaker vocabulary who may need extra support include the following:

- Inscribed
- Mylar
- Jaunty
- Staccato
- Token
- Bereaved
- Pilgrimage
- Leering
- Derision
- Treatises
- Tomes
- Wrought-iron
- Impromptu
- Exhume
- Séances
- Epitaph

“In Memoriam” Quiz

Name _____

- 1) What is the relationship between Thomas and Esther Bramwell?

- 2) Who is the narrator who never refers to him/herself by name or even uses the “I” pronoun during the story?

- 3) What was Thomas’s attitude about love before he met Esther?

- 4) Why is Edgar Allan Poe important in the story?

- 5) What are “temporary memorials” and “memory tokens”?

- 6) Until the end of the story, what is the narrator’s belief about ghosts?

- 7) The narrator meets Esther at the end of the story. Why is she in the cemetery?

- 8) What happens at the end of the story to convince the narrator that he/she is wrong about ghosts?

- 9) Based on your understanding of the story, what does it seem to say about death and love?

“In Memoriam” Quiz Key

An alternate use for the quiz is to re-label it as a worksheet and have the students fill it out as they read.

- 1) What is the relationship between Thomas and Esther Bramwell? *Thomas and Esther were married for many years. Thomas died first. Now Esther visits his grave regularly to leave and collect tokens of their love.*
- 2) Who is the narrator who never refers to him/herself by name or even uses the “I” pronoun during the story? *The narrator is the groundskeeper for the cemetery.*
- 3) What was Thomas’s attitude about love before he met Esther? *The story says “He already identified himself as a confirmed bachelor, a lone scholar, and a man of letters.” He believed he would never marry.*
- 4) Why is Edgar Allan Poe important in the story? *Edgar Allan Poe was the writer who Thomas studied. He also was the poet who Esther was reading when Thomas met her. Poe is the first connection between Thomas and Esther. Poe’s personal story is similar to Thomas and Esther’s except Poe’s wife died first, and then he visited her grave. Also, Poe sets the tone for a story about cemeteries and communication from beyond the grave.*
- 5) What are “temporary memorials” and “memory tokens”? *Mourners visiting a grave will sometimes leave something at a grave that reminds them of their loved one. Esther left a birthday balloon at the grave at the beginning of the story.*
- 6) Until the end of the story, what is the narrator’s belief about ghosts? *The narrator enjoys his job and takes it very seriously, but he does not believe in ghosts. He says, “At night the cemetery is just a quiet park,” and “A cemetery’s silence is of the mundane sort. Nothing seeps from a crypt. No rattling chains. No moans that are not the wind. No bones clattering against bones. What lies below stays below.”*
- 7) The narrator meets Esther at the end of the story. Why is she in the cemetery? *She comes to visit Thomas, of course, and to leave tokens. She also collects tokens from Thomas, who somehow leaves things for her.*
- 8) What happens at the end of the story to convince the narrator that he/she is wrong about ghosts? *He learns from Esther that Thomas is passing tokens back to her from beyond death. He believes that death may not be the end of the story.*
- 9) Based on your understanding of the story, what does it seem to say about death and love? *This is an interpretive question with many possibilities that could be supported. In general, though, the story seems to say that love is more powerful than death, and that love can continue even when someone has died.*

“In Memoriam” Post-reading Activities

One of the most productive ways to approach a discussion of literature is to give students the chance to respond to the story as readers first and as students of literature second. Giving students an opportunity to say what they thought or felt about the reading, or to talk about issues that the story raised before digging into analysis valorizes their opinions. Although not untypical for some teachers, it’s a pretty peculiar student whose first thought about a story is “I wonder what its theme was?” or “How did the characters develop through the story’s events?”

A useful approach to opening discussion can be to use the grading of the quiz as a springboard for talking about the story. Since the questions are open-ended, students can argue for different interpretations of the piece. By the time students finish grading the quiz, they’ve covered 90% of the story.

Journal Prompts (some of these prompts could be turned into formal essays)

- Esther suggested that she could have buried Thomas with a pen and notepad. Write a letter to Esther from Thomas as if she had given him the opportunity to write to her.
- Many people do not believe in ghosts but find ghost stories entertaining. What would someone who does not believe in ghosts find interesting or comforting in this story?
- Use a cemetery as the setting for your own story. Ghosts not required.
- Write a short review of “In Memoriam” that would encourage someone to read it (no spoilers!).
- Who is your favorite character? Why?
- Copy a sentence from the story that you think is well written. Why did you choose this sentence? How does it connect to other parts of the story?
- The story has two narrators: the groundskeeper, who is a first person narrator (a character in the story who tells the story), and an omniscient narrator (a voice that tells the story but is not a character in the story) who tells the story of Esther and Thomas. What do you think is the effect of having two narrators in the story?
- Draw the story as a graphic novel.
- Turn the story into a poem.

For a huge list of writing responses to stories, go to <https://www.centergrove.k12.in.us/page/115>

Literary Analysis Questions

- How does the title relate to the events and meaning of the story?
- What kind of person is Esther? How does the author reveal her character? Use quotes to support your answer.
- What kind of person is Thomas? How does the author reveal his character? Use quotes to support your answer.
- How does the narrator’s voice and the setting contribute to the story’s tone? Identify the tone in your answer and use specific examples to support your choice.
- How is the story structured? How does this structure contribute to the story’s meaning?
- What objects in the story seem symbolic? What do you think they symbolize, and why did they strike you as being more than just literal?
- How is “In Memoriam” not a typical ghost story? What elements do most ghost stories contain that “In Memoriam” lacks or does differently?