



CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE

By Alfred, Lord Tennyson

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FULL POEM

I

Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
 Rode the six hundred.
“Forward, the Light Brigade!
Charge for the guns!” he said.
Into the valley of Death
 Rode the six hundred.

II

“Forward, the Light Brigade!”
Was there a man dismayed?
Not though the soldier knew
 Someone had blundered.
Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die.
Into the valley of Death
 Rode the six hundred.

III

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
 Volleyed and thundered;
Stormed at with shot and shell,
Boldly they rode and well,
Into the jaws of Death,
Into the mouth of hell
 Rode the six hundred.

IV

Flashed all their sabres bare,
Flashed as they turned in air
Sabring the gunners there,
Charging an army, while
 All the world wondered.
Plunged in the battery-smoke
Right through the line they broke;
Cossack and Russian





Reeled from the sabre stroke
Shattered and sundered.
Then they rode back, but not
Not the six hundred.

V

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon behind them
Volleyed and thundered;
Stormed at with shot and shell,
While horse and hero fell.
They that had fought so well
Came through the jaws of Death,
Back from the mouth of hell,
All that was left of them,
Left of six hundred.

VI

When can their glory fade?
O the wild charge they made!
All the world wondered.
Honour the charge they made!
Honour the Light Brigade,
Noble six hundred!





WHO WAS ALFRED LORD TENNYSON?

He was born in 1809 and died in 1892

- a Victorian poet.
- Came from a middle class family.
- His engagement to Emily (his future wife) was at one point forbidden by Emily's father due to Tennyson's poverty.
- In 1850, he was appointed Poet Laureate,
 - a role where he was expected to write verse on occasions of national significance.
 - He held this position for the rest of his life.
 - Wrote 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' in 1855, whilst serving as Poet Laureate

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

This poem is deeply rooted in its historical context,

- being based on a true event that took place shortly before it was written.
 - the poem's narrative cannot be understood without this detail

CONTEXT: THE CRIMEAN WAR

The Crimean War took place between 1853 and 1856.

- a war against Russia, which Britain joined in 1854, fighting alongside France, Turkey and Sardinia.
 - Britain was involved out of fear that Russia's power would spread if it took over modern day Romania.
 - If Russia continued to expand south, it could take control of India and threaten British trade routes.
 - Britain didn't want Russia to have access to the Suez Canal and therefore influence control of trade with India.
 - So Britain got involved in the war.

CONTEXT: PUBLIC OPINIION OF THE WAR

It's important to note that the war was an unpopular one

- there was public doubt and scepticism as to why the UK was involved,
 - as well as some well known mistakes being made at the highest levels of command.





CONTEXT: THE LIGHT BRIGADE vs THE CAVALRY

The poem focuses on one of three main battles:

- the battle of Balaclava, which took place on October 24th 1854.
 - There is a lot of speculation as to what exactly happened and why
 - But the most popular view is that during the siege of Sevastopol, the Russians had taken a beating from the British, and were retreating.
 - As they were retreating, it became clear that they were trying to take some heavy guns with them.
 - The Light Brigade was ordered to ride in and protect the guns.
 - The Light Brigade was made up of lightly armed troops on horseback.
 - The cavalry were the higher social status soldiers
 - - the section of the army which was most expensive to get into,
 - you had to pay for your own horse and equipment.

CONTEXT: COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS

As a result, the cavalry were disrespected by many working class troops,

- particularly considering the fact that they often didn't get involved in battles.
 - Their stated aim was to work as reconnaissance
 - and to mop up a defeated opponent;
 - they were not intended to be used for fixed charges.
 - Three of the people in charge at the battle were Lord Raglan, Lord Cardigan and Lord Lucan.
 - All three of these men were rich, upper class gents who had bought their way into control, and had no real experience at leading war.
 - This, too, is important when we consider the alternative interpretation of the poem.
 - So, the order was sent from Lord Raglan, to use the Light Brigade to protect the heavy guns which were being stolen by the retreating Russians.
 - However, there was a huge mix up in communication, somewhere between the three leaders,

CONTEXT: THE LONDON TIMES REPORT





William Howard Russell, writing for *The London Times*, described the event in the November 14th edition:

'If the exhibition of the most brilliant valour, of the excess of courage, and of a daring which would have reflected luster on the best days of chivalry can afford full consolation for the disaster of today, we can have no reason to regret the melancholy loss which we sustained in a contest with a savage and barbarian enemy.

I shall proceed to describe, to the best of my power, what occurred under my own eyes, and to state the facts which I have heard from men whose veracity is unimpeachable, reserving to myself the right of private judgement in making public and in suppressing the details of what occurred on this memorable day...

[The Russians were retreating after having lost a battle with the British]

At 11:00 our Light Cavalry Brigade rushed to the front... The Russians opened on them with guns from the redoubts on the right, with volleys of musketry and rifles.

They swept proudly past, glittering in the morning sun in all the pride and splendor of war. We could hardly believe the evidence of our senses. Surely that handful of men were not going to charge an army in position? Alas! It was but too true -- their desperate valour knew no bounds, and far indeed was it removed from its so-called better part -- discretion. They advanced in two lines, quickening the pace as they closed towards the enemy. A more fearful spectacle was never witnessed than by those who, without the power to aid, beheld their heroic countrymen rushing to the arms of sudden death. At the distance of 1200 yards the whole line of the enemy belched forth, from thirty iron mouths, a flood of smoke and flame through which hissed the deadly balls. Their flight was marked by instant gaps in our ranks, the dead men and horses, by steeds flying wounded or riderless across the plain. The first line was broken -- it was joined by the second, they never halted or checked their speed an instant. With diminished ranks, thinned by those thirty guns, which the Russians had laid with the most deadly accuracy, with a halo of flashing steel above their heads, and with a cheer which was many a noble fellow's death cry, they flew into the smoke of the batteries; but ere they were lost from view, the plain was strewn with their bodies and with the carcasses of horses. They were exposed to an oblique fire from the batteries on the hills on both sides, as well as to a direct fire of musketry.

Through the clouds of smoke we could see their sabers flashing as they rode up to the guns and dashed between them, cutting down the gunners as they stood. The blaze of their steel, like an officer standing near me said, "was like the turn of a shoal of mackerel." We saw them riding through the guns, as I have said; to our delight, we saw them returning, after breaking through a column of Russian infantry and scattering them like chaff, when the flank fire of the battery on the hill swept them down, scattered and broken as they were. Wounded men and dismounted troopers flying towards us told the sad tale -- demigods could not have done what they had failed to do. At the very moment when they were about to retreat, a regiment of lancers was hurled upon their flank. Colonel Shewell, of the 8th Hussars, saw the danger and rode his men straight at them, cutting his way through with fearful loss. The other regiments turned and engaged in a desperate encounter. With courage too great almost for credence, they were breaking their way through the columns which enveloped them, where there took place an act of atrocity without parallel in modern warfare of civilized nations. The Russian gunners, when the storm of cavalry passed, returned to their guns. They saw their own cavalry mingled with the troopers who had just ridden over them, and to the eternal disgrace of the Russian name, the miscreants poured a murderous volley of grape and canister on the mass of struggling men and horses, mingling friend and foe in one common ruin. It was as much as our Heavy Cavalry Brigade could do to cover the retreat of the miserable remnants of that band of heroes as they returned to the place they had so lately quitted in all the pride of life. At 11:35 not a British soldier, except the dead and dying, was left in front of those bloody Muscovite guns'

CONTEXT: A PR NIGHTMARE





So, the whole situation was becoming a PR nightmare.

- The British public could read the report as a criticism of the blundering upper classes who couldn't get anything right.
 - When this story was published in the UK, the public read it and were outraged.
 - In fact, Florence Nightingale, having read the article, decided to go to Crimea and help out.
 - Tennyson, too, read the article and sat down to write his poem.
 - In his role as Poet Laureate he perhaps felt it was the right thing to do:
 - to lift public spirits by writing a poem which praised the bravery of the soldiers.
 - The whole event could be spun into a positive one, if the focus was on the bravery and courage of the soldiers, glorious in defeat.
 - And that leaves us with a very simplistic analysis of the poem –
 - one which praises the bravery of the British soldiers.

ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION

we can also read the poem as a criticism of both the upper classes and blind obedience to power.

- In the exam, your ability to offer alternative interpretations is a key to achieving the highest grades.
 - look at the poem in terms of the positive, and look at it in terms of the negative.
 - To do this, focus on the poet's use of language, structure and form.

FORM ANALYSIS: BALLAD

The ballad is a historic form of poetry which often used to be sung

- It is a poem which tells a story,
 - and contains a refrain.
 - A refrain is like the chorus of a song-
 - a line which is repeated regularly throughout the poem. In TCOTLB the refrain is the use of 'six hundred' at the end of each verse.
 - The form has medieval roots, where storytellers would use the musicality of the refrain to help others remember the stories they were telling.
 - Ballads are therefore associated with important tales and histories –
 - things you should never forget.
 - The ballad form therefore suggests that there is an element of folklore to the Charge of the Light Brigade,
 - and that it is an awe inspiring act of bravery which should be passed on to future generations, never to be forgotten.





However, it is equally valid to say that Tennyson wanted the public not just to never forget the bravery of the soldiers, but also to never forget the stupidity of the aristocratic leadership.

- It can be read as both a tale of praise to be proud of, and a cautionary tale to learn from.

STRUCTURE

The poem uses **dactylic dimeter**.

- in an exam you won't need to explain what it is
 - but rather why it's used.

"Forward, the / Light Brigade!"
Was there a / **man** dismayed?
Not though the / **soldier** knew
Someone had / **blundered**.
Theirs not to / **make** reply,
Theirs not to / **reason** why,
Theirs but to / **do** and die.

When we talk about meter, we're talking about which syllables in a line are stressed - which ones are emphasised more than the others.

- As you can see, the syllables in bold are the ones we stress –
 - So, the stressed syllables come at the start and middle of each line.
 - They are followed by (mostly) two syllables which are unstressed (or perhaps we should say 'less stressed').
 - Once we've worked out the stress, we can look at something called the feet.
 - There are only six types of feet in English poetry:
 - iamb,
 - trochee,
 - spondee,
 - dactyl,
 - anapaest
 - and pyrrhic.
 - A dactyl is made up of one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables.
 - If we break the poem up with the forward slashes we can see that each line is made up of two dactylic feet.
 - When there are two feet per line, we call that a dimeter, so the poem is written in dactylic dimeter.

STRUCTURE FROM A POSITIVE PERSPECTIVE





In the positive interpretation of the poem, where we see Tennyson's aim as being to create awe at the bravery of the soldiers, the use of dactylic dimeter is fairly simple to explain.

- To help readers fully appreciate the bravery of the soldiers, Tennyson needed to help us to feel as if we were there on the battlefield with them.
 - The DUM-de-de DUM-de-de meter mirrors the galloping hoof beats of the horses.
 - As an aside here, it's interesting to note that Tennyson recorded himself reading the poem in 1890 - one of the earliest recordings ever made.
 - In the recording, he increases the pace of his reading as he progresses through the poem.
 - This reflects the fact that the soldiers, on their horses, would have started off at a slow trot and sped up at the end –
 - they had a mile to travel.
 - If we include the speeding up of reading, it is clear that the dactylic dimeter not only echoes the hoof beats of the horses,
 - but also adds energy and pace to the poem,
 - all of which combines to help the reader empathise with the situation the soldiers found themselves in.
 - We might also call this a falling rhythm, with the two unstressed syllables following the stressed syllable. This falling rhythm reflects the falling soldiers.

STRUCTURE FROM A NEGATIVE PERSPECTIVE: DACTYLIC METER

However, there is a less positive interpretation of the dactylic dimeter,

- which relies on an understanding of when it is most often used in poetry.
 - Historically, dactylic meter was often used for humorous poetry,
 - employed in light hearted verse.
 - In this way, the dactyl seems completely inappropriate for the poem –
 - the death of so many soldiers is not a funny subject.
 - So why use it? Perhaps there is a satirical edge to the usage.
 - Again, subtly Tennyson is satirically criticising what took place,
 - under the surface of what seems to be a purely patriotic poem.
 - At this point it's important to note that one line in the extract above does not conform to dactylic dimeter, and that is the line 'someone had blundered'.
 - The word 'blundered' falls short of the metrical rule, as there is only one syllable after the first 'blun':





STRUCTURE FROM A NEGATIVE PERSPECTIVE: 'THE BLUNDER'

Someone had / blundered

- Clearly Tennyson is making a point here –
 - he wants to emphasise the 'blunder', by which he means the leadership error which led to this suicide mission taking place.
 - This is a subtle way in which the poet draws our attention to the mistake.
 - The word 'blunder' means 'stupid or careless mistake'.
 - By deliberately breaking the rules of his chosen poetic structure, Tennyson is subtly drawing the reader's attention to his disgust at the cause of the fatalities.
 - Perhaps he is reflecting the breaking of military rules that lead to the deaths of those men
 - He had to do is subtly, as dictated by his role of poet laureate, but it is there.
 - Whereas the dactyls create the sound of the horses galloping forwards, the fourth line is shortened which mirrors how the soldiers' lives will also be shortened.

LANGUAGE: BIBLICAL ALLUSION

There are a number of Biblical references used within the poem

- In verse one we read of the 'Valley of Death', a reference to Psalm 23:
 - 'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.'
 - The reference would be clear to Victorian readers,
 - and through establishing the Biblical imagery so early on in the poem, Tennyson is once again highlighting the bravery of the soldiers.
 - The Biblical allusion makes clear the importance of the event.
 - Psalm 23 was written by King David, and there is clearly a similarity between the account of David and Goliath and the Light Brigade's charge on the Russians.
 - To begin with, both battles took place in a valley.
 - Both also contained an underdog taking on a powerful enemy.
 - Tennyson is here using the Biblical imagery to highlight the bravery of the soldiers.
 - It is worth picking up on the lines, 'theirs not to make reply, theirs not to reason why, theirs but to





do and die'. The use of repetition by Tennyson here highlights that, to him, this is an important point being made.

A COMMENTARY ON VICTORIAN OBEDIENCE

So what is he saying? We need to understand something of Victorian culture to appreciate these lines fully.

- Victorian England valued order and obedience to hierarchy.
 - We see this in the soldiers, but we cannot be sure that this blind obedience is being praised.
 - Tennyson can be seen to mourn the absence of individual freedom in the armed forces, questioning such unflinching obedience.

LANGUAGE: WORD CHOICE

There are a number of ambiguous language choices within the poem, which allow both a positive and negative interpretation.

- The most significant of these is the use of the word 'wondered' in the line 'all the world wondered'.
 - In the positive analysis, we can interpret this word to mean 'to admire or be amazed by'.
 - In other words, everyone was awestruck by the bravery of the soldiers.
 - However, the word 'wondered' has a secondary meaning too.
 - It can also mean 'to question'.
 - With this definition in mind, we can see that the line can be interpreted to mean 'the whole world questioned how such a stupid mistake could have been made'.

FREEDOM OF INTERPRETATION

Both interpretations are valid, but it is a sign of Tennyson's poetic talent that his poem can be interpreted in alternative ways.

- Many words in the poem create a sense of sound.
 - Through the use of 'thundered', 'shattered', 'sundered' and 'blundered', there is an almost drum like beat created through reading the poem.
 - However, the critic Matthew Bevis has argued that this repetition of 'ered' is used because of its phonetic similarity to the words 'err' and 'erred', i.e. to make an error.
 - Again, this would be a subtle but noticeable criticism from Tennyson.
 - Within the final word of the line 'all the world wondered', 34 we see a perfect example of how both positive and negative analysis of the poem can be arrived at,
 - 'It also carries within it the sound of the poem's pride for the men alongside its awareness of the pointlessness of their death ('won', 'erred').'





Bevis, Matthew, *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, (UK: Oxford University Press, 1997).

