

AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Power and Conflict

Charge of the Light Brigade - *Alfred Lord Tennyson*



THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Brief Summary

A large brigade of soldiers are commanded to march to their deaths. They charge heroically but few remain as they retreat.

Synopsis

- Light brigade charging through a valley after being ordered to charge the Russian guns
- Had received an order and were unable to dispute it
- There had been a mistake in the order – it was a "blunder"
- Surrounded by cannons and artillery fire
- Big heroic battle – bayonets ("sabres") versus guns
- Come back from the battle but many soldiers left behind dead
- Surrounded again as they retreat
- Tennyson instructs the reader to remember, honour and glorify the "noble six hundred"

Summary

Context – The poem explores the traditional idea of patriotism and honour through the voice of the poet laureate who would have to be moderate in their writing.

Structure - Enjambment and caesura are used frequently to quicken the pace of the poem to mirror the chaos and panic of war.

Language – Metaphors and euphemisms are used to show how the brutality of the situation remains unacknowledged.

Key Points – The poem begins in media res which adds to the tense atmosphere created.

Context

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1850-1892)

Tennyson had an unhappy childhood caused by his abusive father who left his mother and her children fearful for their safety. He did, however, receive a good education through his middle class family and rich relatives who allowed him to attend excellent grammar schools. After a period of experiencing intense poverty, Tennyson was given the role of poet laureate. In this position, he was duty bound to glorify war to the British public to defend the positions of the aristocracy.

The Crimean War

Initially this was a conflict between Russia and the Ottoman empire however, eventually France and Britain got involved to prevent Russian expansion. This was unpopular with the British public who saw it as unnecessary and as this was the most well documented war at the time, they were aware of the mistakes made. The light brigade were often members of the lower class who were lightly armoured and on horseback.



The Charge of the Light Brigade

Repetition of distance emphasises how far they have to go and creates a sense of their exposure and vulnerability.

Reported speech shows the sense of duty to their leaders.

This foreshadows the military mistake about to occur.

This repetition emphasises the harsh military machinery surrounding them.

The fricatives and sibilance used in this emphatic repetition highlight the brutality of the situation.

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.

'Forward, the Light Brigade!
Was there a man dismay'd?
Not tho' the soldier knew
Some one had blunder'd:
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.

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
Volley'd and thunder'd;
Storm'd at with shot and shell,
Boldly they rode and well,
Into the jaws of Death,
Into the mouth of Hell
Rode the six hundred.

Flash'd all their sabres bare,
Flash'd as they turn'd in air
Sabring the gunners there,
Charging an army, while
All the world wonder'd:
Plunged in the battery-smoke
Right thro' the line they broke;
Cossack and Russian
Reel'd from the sabre-stroke
Shatter'd and sunder'd.
Then they rode back, but not
Not the six hundred.

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,

This number is repeated throughout the poem to emphasise the number of lives lost.

This rhetorical question implies that there is some doubt in the soldier's minds

A biblical allusion creates a grand sense of scale as well as foreshadowing death.

This use of sibilance creates a sinister tone, increasing the aggressive tone of the violence being described.

This is again repeated to emphasise the harsh, mechanical nature of war.



Cannon behind them
Volley'd and thunder'd;
Storm'd at with shot and shell,
While horse and hero fell,
They that had fought so well
Came thro' the jaws of Death
Back from the mouth of Hell,
All that was left of them,
Left of six hundred.

This rhetorical question alludes to the poem being a piece of propaganda

The use of an imperative closes the poem with the intention of glorifying the soldiers

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

This shows how the poem is glorifying war



The opening

In medias res

The unprepared listener is thrust into the action with the **repetition** of **“Half a league”**. This establishes a **tense atmosphere** from the onset which causes the listener to view the poem through the lens of threat and risk.

“In the valley of death
// Rode the six
hundred”

“Charge of the Light Brigade”

The poem is representative of a literal charge which is reflected in the title. The light brigade charged at a stationary Russian cavalry who only has to stand and shoot, which could be representative of the power imbalance between the two. **“Charge”** has a double meaning which could be interpreted as Tennyson charging the leaders of his country with the deaths of so many people.

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.

The repetition of **“half a league”** reflects the pounding feet of a charge, and also reflects the pack mentality of a group of people charging.

Structure and form

Ballad form

This poem takes on the form of a **ballad** which is a historic poetry form used to **commemorate a story** for future generations to hear. This poem fits this purpose and acts to **memorialise** the people who were killed.

Dactylic dimeter

Tennyson uses **dactylic dimeter** (a long syllable followed by two short syllables) to mirror the rhythm of a horse running into battle. This **unrelenting rhythm** implies that the soldiers have no choice but to run into battle or that they are blindly obeying orders. The **meter** could also be interpreted to be used to create satirical humour as it is often seen as a lighthearted rhythm.

Rhyme scheme

The rhyme scheme is irregular and there are rhyming couplets between indented lines. The couplets create a sense of inevitability however, chaos is introduced by the irregular rhyme scheme.



Language

Repetition

The **anaphora** used in *“theirs not to make reply/reason why”... “theirs but to do an die”* reiterates the phrase and the soldiers’ obedience (a desirable trait in Victorian England). The **repetition** also highlights the **soldiers’ lack of individualism**. The use of **epistrophe** in *“Rode the six hundred”* focuses the listener on the topic of the poem as well as acting as a reprise for the ballad.

Euphemisms

In order to soften the impact of the brutal battle, Tennyson uses **euphemisms** instead of explicitly referring to death. He states that *“horse and hero fell”* which is emphasised through his use of **alliteration**. The falling of the soldiers is accompanied by the **falling rhythm of the dactylic dimeter**. In his role as laureate, it was his job to avoid presenting the reality of battle.

Metaphors

Tennyson’s use of **metaphors** creates **negative connotations** for the listener. In *“Jaws of death”*, *“Jaws”* has **claustrophobic connotations**, which imply that the soldiers will be ‘eaten up’ by or shredded by bullets.

Similarly, the **metaphor “Mouth of hell”** creates the impression that there is no escape from the valley once it has been entered. This also alludes to the story of the Roman soldier, Curtius, who rode his horse into the mouth of hell and was killed sacrificially, saving Rome.

Symbolism

The phrase *“valley of death”* is a **biblical allusion** from Psalm 23 which refers to the protection provided by God so is highly ironic when used in this context:

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. - PSALM 23

This could be a criticism by Tennyson of how members of higher ranks should have protected those in the light brigade but they were instead forced to engage in dangerous conflict because of their low status. This phrase can also be considered to **symbolise the inevitability of the tragedy**, the image of a valley implies that the soldiers are penned in and surrounded on all sides by the opposition.

The idea of soldiers returning *“from the mouth of hell”* links to the story of the harrying of hell. Jesus went into hell in order to receive the souls of those who had been condemned there to allow them to achieve salvation. This relates back to the soldiers in that they were sacrificing their own freedom for the freedom of those back at home.

Ambiguity

Tennyson creates **ambiguity** in *“all the world wondered”* to cause the listener to question if *“wondered”* denotes admiration or doubt.



Comparisons

Bayonet Charge

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poems criticise the leaders of war, this is explicit in Bayonet Charge but more subtle in Charge of the Light Brigade. There is the implication in both poems that propaganda is a powerful tool in the public attitude to war.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Charge of the Light Brigade praises the blind obedience of soldiers in the rhetorical question “When can their glory fade?” whilst in Bayonet Charge, the perception of honour is challenged in “In bewilderment then he almost stopped”. Tennyson presents the soldier’s bravery in the repetition in “Honour the charge they made!” “Honour the light brigade”. Oppositely, Hughes encourages the questioning of war in “King, honour, human dignity, etcetera // Dropped like luxuries in a yelling alarm”. The more critical tone of Bayonet Charge is reflective of Hughes being relatively unknown when this was published whilst Tennyson was poet laureate, allowing Hughes more freedom. Tennyson uses dactylic dimeter to create a quick pace to glorify the action whereas Hughes presents war as a source of fear and panic.

Exposure

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tennyson is critical of military leader’s decisions by bluntly declaring “Someone had blundered” and stating “Honour the Light Brigade” at the end rather than their leaders. Owen is similarly negative and creates this effect by depicting the soldiers as isolated in “Worried by silence” which implies that they have been abandoned by the authority that put them there. Both poets repeat phrases to criticise how violence and military mistakes continue to repeat themselves. Tennyson repeats “six hundred” to emphasise the vast number of lives lost as well as “Cannon” to remind the listener that the Light Brigade is surrounded by weaponry. Similarly, Owen repeats “nothing happens” to show that they are being forced to wait in the freezing trenches for no reason.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As Tennyson was poet laureate at the time he would not have been able to be outwardly critical of the government hence why the poem contains lexis from the semantic field of propaganda in “glory”, “Honour” and “Noble”. Owen did not have these restrictions as he was a soldier on the front line at the time of writing it. Tennyson is critical of rash action in his poem which is shown by the brash verb “plunged” whereas Owen detests the waiting in the trenches.



Remains

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poets explore the consequences of conflict.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remains is written in the first person and offers a first-hand account of a soldier's traumatic experience. It shows a psychological viewpoint and focuses on the aftermath of conflict and the emotional impact on an individual soldier. The Charge of the Light Brigade is a narrative poem which commemorates the valor of soldiers in a historical military engagement. Armitage uses a sombre and reflective tone in Remains: <i>“Well myself and somebody else and somebody else / are all of the same mind, /so all three of us open fire.”</i> whereas the Tennyson adopts a more celebratory and patriotic tone: <i>“Their’s not to reason why, / Their’s but to do and die.”</i> Language and imagery - Armitage uses modern language and vivid imagery to convey the soldier's internal struggles and the impact of war on the individual. Tennyson employs a more traditional rhythmic style, employing repetition and powerful imagery to depict the grandeur and chaos of battle.

