

THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE by Alfred Lord Tennyson

BACKGROUND TO THE POET

- ✓ Tennyson was born in 1809 into a middle class family.
- ✓ He was appointed Poet Laureate in 1850. This role meant he was expected to write poetry on occasions that considered of national significance.
- ✓ This poem, was written in 1855 during his term as Poet Laureate.

BACKGROUND TO THE POEM

- ✓ The poem is based on a true event, which took place at the Battle of Balaclava during the Crimean War. During this battle the Russian army suffered heavy losses and were retreating. The British Army wanted to ensure their weapons were secure and so The Light Brigade were ordered to go and protect them.
- ✓ However, due to a catastrophic mix-up the Light Brigade ended up riding in to a situation which saw them surrounded by Russian troops. They suffered heavy losses with over 150 being killed and a further 150 injured.
- ✓ The event was reported in the British press, and the 'blundering' upper class 'Lords' who had been in charge were heavily criticised. Tennyson read one such report and the image of the fallen soldiers, stayed with him. As an important historical event he wrote about it as Poet Laureate.

WHAT IS THE POEM ABOUT?

- ✓ The Light Brigade consisted of soldiers who were typically of higher social status to other soldiers. They rode on horseback and were only lightly armed so were not typically involved in front line battles.
- ✓ There was a mix up with the communication between the three Lords that were in charge of the battle. All of them were inexperienced as leaders during a war, and came from the rich upper classes.
- ✓ Despite being surrounded by enemy troops the Light Brigade fought valiantly with what little weaponry they had, however they suffered heavy losses.
- ✓ The British public were understandably outraged when the event was reported in the press.
- ✓ As Poet Laureate Tennyson was expected to write about events of national significance. His portrayal of the charge was to praise the unwavering bravery of the soldiers, which subtly criticising those in charge.

THEMES

- ✓ Positive: unwavering bravery of the soldiers who felt they had no choice but to follow orders.
- ✓ Negative: incompetence of those in power.

COMPARISONS

Reality of War	Effects of Conflict	Identity
Exposure, War Photographer, Kamikaze, Bayonet Charge, Remains	Exposure, War Photographer, Kamikaze, Bayonet Charge, Remains, Poppies	Exposure, Tissue, Kamikaze, Checkin Out Me History, Poppies

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FORM

- ✓ The poem is written as a ballad. Ballads are poems which used to be sung. They are typically used to write notable stories that the poet wants the reader to remember.
- ✓ The last line in every stanza of a ballad contains a refrain, which is a repeated message throughout the poem. This makes it easy for the reader to recall the key message.
- ✓ The key message in the poem is the bravery of the soldiers. Which is what the last line in every stanza focusses on. Tennyson did not want the public to forget the bravery they had shown.

STRUCTURE

- ✓ The rhythm of the poem is predominantly dactylic dimeter (six syllables in every line, with the first and the third being stressed – sort of like Dah-da-da). This can be seen to echo the hooves of the horses as the soldiers rode in to battle. However, dactylic dimeter can also be thought of as a falling-rhythm reflects the fallen soldiers.
- ✓ The only line which does not follow dactylic dimeter is 'Someone had blundered'. This only contains five syllables which makes it stand out. This is Tennyson's way of drawing attention to the fact that the fatalities occurred because of the incompetence of those in charge.

LANGUAGE / QUOTES

- ✓ The poem contains some biblical references: "Valley of Death" refers to Psalm 23. This biblical imagery highlights the bravery of the soldiers and the importance of the event.
- ✓ Psalm 23 was written by King David, and it makes the reader draw comparisons to the battle of David and Goliath. The implication here is that the Light Brigade represent David, and the Russian troops who surrounded them were the Russian army. This image again highlights the bravery of the soldiers.
- ✓ Tennyson repeats the phrase 'Theirs not' in the second stanza. This represents the Victorian culture which was very hierarchical. The soldiers would not have been able to challenge the orders of those in charge, despite them knowing they were heading towards probable death.
- ✓ The line 'All the world wondered' could have a number of meanings. 'wonder' could mean 'amazed' in that everyone was amazed at the soldiers bravery. Or, it could mean 'questioned', implying that everyone was questioning the ability of those in charge.
- ✓ Many of the words used in the poem create a sound 'thundered', 'shattered', 'sundered'. This emphasises the drum-like beat created by the rhythm and further echoes the horses hooves.
- ✓ Interestingly the 'ered' ending of these words subtly brings to mind 'err' as in 'an error', Again, Tennyson is subtly criticising those in charge.
- ✓ The refrain in each stanza reflects the number of soldiers. Stanzas 1-3 'Rode the six hundred' becomes 'Not the six hundred', 'Left of six hundred', 'Noble six hundred'. This ensures people will remember the number of soldiers involved.
- ✓ Interestingly there are six stanzas in the poem – one for each 100 soldiers involved in the charge.