

“Do Now” Work

How does Tennyson present his ideas in 'The Charge of the Light Brigade'?

Be able to identify techniques and explore the effect on the reader.

Answer the following questions:

- What is an imperative?
- What is a verb?
- What is an adjective?

In Silence Please

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'The Charge of the Light Brigade'

First published in *Maud* (1855), the poem tells the story of the failed charge of the British cavalry in the Battle of Balaclava in October 1854. Britain was fighting with France, Sardinia and the Ottoman Empire against Russian forces in the Crimean War, which was about control of the Dardanelles, a narrow sea straight in Turkey. If the Russians had power over the Dardanelles, British sea routes (and trade) would have been threatened.

Although it is unclear who was actually responsible, a cavalry group, the Light Brigade (led disastrously by Lord Cardigan who miraculously survived), was ordered to attack a very strongly defended Russian position. Part of his account to Parliament reads:

'We advanced down a gradual descent of more than three-quarters of a mile, with the batteries vomiting forth upon us shells and shot, round and grape, with one battery on our right flank and another on the left, and all the intermediate ground covered with the Russian riflemen; so that when we came to within a distance of fifty yards from the mouths of the artillery which had been hurling destruction upon us, we were, in fact, surrounded and encircled by a blaze of fire, in addition to the fire of the riflemen upon our flanks.

As we ascended the hill the oblique fire of the artillery poured upon our rear, so that we had thus a strong fire upon our front, our flank, and our rear.

We entered the battery – we went through the battery – the two leading regiments cutting down a great number of the Russian gunners in their onset. In the two regiments which I had the honour to lead, every officer, with one exception, was either killed or wounded, or had his horse shot under him or injured. Those regiments proceeded, followed by the second line, consisting of two more regiments of cavalry, which continued to perform the duty of cutting down the Russian gunners. Then came the third line, formed of another regiment, which endeavoured to complete the duty assigned to our brigade. ...'

(Lord Cardigan's address to the House of Commons, 29 March 1855)

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'The Charge of the Light Brigade' is about an advance made by approximately 600 British soldiers on horseback in 1854 during the Battle of Balaclava, part of the **Crimean War**. The Crimean war was fought between **Russia and the British, French and Ottoman Turkish Empire**. Tennyson read a newspaper report about the battle, and he wrote the poem to **celebrate the sacrifice the soldiers made** for their country. However, Tennyson **criticises the orders given** by Lord Raglan, the man in charge, as his order caused many deaths.

1. Find a quotation which celebrates the soldiers' sacrifice.
2. Find a quotation which criticises the orders given to the soldiers.

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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 poem makes reference to the valley of death. This could mean that the soldiers were brave whilst riding into battle as they knew God was with them.

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Key Words

- 'league' – a distance most commonly defined as three miles
- 'cannon' – large heavy ground based gun that were used to fire huge balls of metal
- 'sabre' – a sword
- 'Cossack' – the name given during Tennyson's time to people from the Ukraine and Southern Russia

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The Charge of the Light Brigade

1.
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.
2.
'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.
3.
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.
4.
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.
5.
Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
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.
6.
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!

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The soldiers are referred to as a group which unites them in their purpose. By using the **noun phrase** 'six hundred', Tennyson highlights the sense of loss for the reader. Also, the last line of the **stanza** changes throughout the poem which gives the poem a narrative quality, telling the story of the soldiers' demise.

The poem begins in **dactylic dimeter**. This **strong rhythm** mimics the soldiers riding into battle. They seem like an unstoppable force; this is reinforced by the use of **repetition**.

Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

The **metaphor** 'valley of Death' implies that the soldier had no chance of surviving. Alternatively, it could relate to Psalm 23 in the Bible: 'the valley of the shadow of death'. In the Psalm, the valley of death is about being fearless. Tennyson could be suggesting that the soldiers were brave and fearless.

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Comprehension Questions

1. During which war did the Charge of the Light Brigade occur?
2. How many men were involved in the charge?
3. Who were they fighting against?
4. What surrounded them in the valley?
5. How were the soldiers armed?
6. What does Tennyson urge us to do at the end of the poem?

Deeper Thinking Questions

1. Do you think the battle would still be remembered if it wasn't for Tennyson's poem?
2. How is this poem relevant today?
3. Do you believe the cavalrymen were heroes?

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Compare the ways poets present bravery in 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' and in one other poem from Power and Conflict.

'The Charge of the Light Brigade' Tennyson

Context:

'The Charge of the Light Brigade' is about an advance made by approximately 600 British soldiers on horseback in 1854 during the Battle of Balaclava, part of the Crimean War. The Crimean war Russia against the British, French and Ottoman Turkish Empire. Tennyson read a newspaper report about the battle, and he wrote the poem to celebrate the sacrifice the soldiers made for their country. However, Tennyson criticises the orders given by Lord Raglan, the man in charge, as his order caused many deaths. Tennyson was poet laureate, so he couldn't be openly critical of British systems.

Themes: Effects of conflict
Experience of soldiers
Reality of conflict
Power of humans

S 'Half a league' - Strong rhythm (dactylic dimeter) mimics the soldiers riding into battle. They seem like an unstoppable force.

P 'Cannon to right... Cannon to left' - anaphora. This emphasises the fact the soldiers were surrounded.

L 'Theirs but to do and die' - Soldiers follow orders to their death - criticises those with power. Alliteration of do and die links action to death.

I 'valley of Death.' - metaphor implying that death is inevitable. The repetition reinforces the sense of doom. Link to psalm 23 - soldiers were fearless.

T 'Honour'. This imperative is repeated at the end of the poem. Tennyson thinks the soldiers' bravery should be remembered.