

The Charge of the Light  
Brigade

Alfred Lord Tennyson

Born on August 6, 1809, in Somersby, Lincolnshire, England, Alfred Tennyson is one of the most well-loved Victorian poets. Tennyson, the fourth of twelve children, showed an early talent for writing. At the age of twelve he wrote a 6,000-line epic poem. His father, the Reverend George Tennyson, tutored his sons in classical and modern languages. At the age of 41, Tennyson had established himself as the most popular poet of the Victorian era. In 1884, he accepted a peerage, becoming Alfred Lord Tennyson. Tennyson died on October 6, 1892, and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" recalls a disastrous historical military engagement that took place during the initial phase of the Crimean War fought between Turkey and Russia (1854-56). Under the command of Lord Raglan, British forces entered the war in September 1854 to prevent the Russians from obtaining control of the important sea routes through the Dardanelles. From the beginning, the war was plagued by a series of misunderstandings and tactical blunders, one of which serves as the subject of this poem: on October 25, 1854, as the Russians were seizing guns from British soldiers, Lord Raglan sent desperate orders to his Light Cavalry Brigade to fend off the Russians. Finally, one of his orders was acted upon, and the brigade began charging—but in the wrong direction! Over 650 men rushed forward, and well over 100 died within the next few minutes. As a result of the battle, Britain lost possession of the majority of its forward defenses and the only metaled road in the area.

Distance soldiers were commanded to march forward (about a mile and a half)  
Repetition demonstrates repetitiveness of battle and the lack of gains being made as they were only able to move a mile and a half at a time.

Imperative verbs demonstrate how the soldiers had no choice but to do as they were told by the commanding officer, despite the obvious danger they were in.

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.

Nickname soldiers gave to the battle ground.  
Suggests they knew entering there would likely cause their death.

Repetition emphasises the number of soldiers forced to go forward on in this suicidal battle.

Rhetorical question demonstrates how even though the soldiers were terrified, they knew they must obey orders.

'Forward, the Light Brigade!'

Was there a man dismay'd?

Not tho' the soldier knew

Someone had blunder'd:

Their's not to make reply,

Their's not to reason why,

Their's but to do and die:

Into the valley of Death

Rode the six hundred.

Each soldier knew that they were not allowed to question orders but to simply carry them out, even if they knew it would almost certainly mean death.

Verb demonstrates mistake made by commanding officer and how all of the soldiers were aware of it.

Repetition emphasising the number of men following orders to their deaths.

Repetition demonstrates the  
image of an unrelenting assault.

Cannon to right of them,  
Cannon to left of them,  
Cannon in front of them  
Volley'd and thunder'd;

Powerful verbs  
demonstrate the  
violence and aggression  
the soldiers faced.

Again powerful verbs  
demonstrate the  
violence and aggression  
the soldiers faced.

Adverb shows the  
bravery the soldiers  
displayed when facing  
the enemy.

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.

Repetition used again to  
emphasise just how many  
men were being ordered to  
march to their death.

Personification  
demonstrates how death  
was almost going to "eat  
them alive" and the lack  
of escape.

Repetition of verb emphasises the unrelenting shots being fired at the soldiers as they advanced.

Verbs demonstrate soldiers determination to keep fighting with their swords.

Verb shows how quickly the enemy were able to advance and break through the front line.

Verb shows how desperately the men tried to attack their enemy.

The soldier have swords to fight the shots the enemy is firing at them.

Adjective "bare" shows the soldiers vulnerability because of this.

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.

Everybody else could see the suicidal battle the soldiers were in and questioned why they were doing it.

Verbs demonstrate how the enemy was able to shatter and easily split the front line apart.

Like the soldiers knew at the start  
of the battle many had been killed.

Then they rode back, but not  
Not the six hundred.

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.

Repetition of noun to  
emphasise how few have  
survived.

Repetition again  
demonstrates the  
image of an  
unrelenting assault.

Personification from  
earlier repeated to  
demonstrate how some  
of the soldiers manage  
to survive.

Repetition of verbs from  
earlier in the poem  
demonstrate how the battle  
did not stop, despite the  
significant loss of life.

Noun shows  
admiration and  
respect people had for  
the soldiers who had  
faced the battle.

Rhetorical question to emphasise how they will always be heroes for what they faced.

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!

Adjective emphasises hopelessness of the battle, links to nature and the survival instinct of the soldiers.

Demonstrates the confusion as to why the soldiers went into this battle in the first place, what was gained?

Imperative verb orders the reader to respect the soldiers for what they did.

Adjective demonstrates how highly the soldiers were thought of for entering the battle.

# Structure

This poem is comprised of six numbered stanzas varying in length from six to twelve lines. Each line is in dimeter, which means it has two stressed syllables; moreover, each stressed syllable is followed by two unstressed syllables, making the rhythm dactylic. The use of "falling" rhythm, in which the stress is on the first beat of each metrical unit, and then "falls off" for the rest of the length of the meter, is appropriate in a poem about the devastating fall of the British brigade.

# Key Question

How does the writer use language to portray the horrors of battle?