The Charge of the Light Brigade

POEM TEXT

I
1 Half a league, half a league,
2 Half a league onward,
3 All in the valley of Death
4   Rode the six hundred.
5 "Forward, the Light Brigade!
6 Charge for the guns!" he said.
7 Into the valley of Death
8   Rode the six hundred.

II
9 "Forward, the Light Brigade!"
10 Was there a man dismayed?
11 Not though the soldier knew
12   Someone had blundered.
13   Theirs not to make reply,
14   Theirs not to reason why,
15   Theirs but to do and die.
16   Into the valley of Death
17   Rode the six hundred.

III
18 Cannon to right of them,
19 Cannon to left of them,
20 Cannon in front of them
21   Volleyed and thundered;
22 Stormed at with shot and shell,
23 Boldly they rode and well,
24 Into the jaws of Death,
25 Into the mouth of hell
26   Rode the six hundred.

IV
27 Flashed all their sabres bare,
28 Flashed as they turned in air
29 Sabring the gunners there,
30 Charging an army, while
31   All the world wondered.
32 Plunged in the battery-smoke
33 Right through the line they broke;
34 Cossack and Russian

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

V
39 Cannon to right of them,
40 Cannon to left of them,
41 Cannon behind them
42   Volleyed and thundered;
43 Stormed at with shot and shell,
44 While horse and hero fell.
45 They that had fought so well
46 Came through the jaws of Death,
47 Back from the mouth of hell,
48 All that was left of them,
49   Left of six hundred.

VI
50 When can their glory fade?
51 O the wild charge they made!
52   All the world wondered.
53 Honour the charge they made!
54 Honour the Light Brigade,
55   Noble six hundred!

SUMMARY

1.

The six hundred cavalrymen rode for a mile and a half into the valley of Death. "Light Brigade, advance! Charge for the artillery" their commander said. So the six hundred cavalrymen charged into the valley of Death.

2.

"Light brigade advance!" the commander said. Was any soldier discouraged or afraid? No—even though they all knew the charge was a mistake. It wasn't up to them to dispute their orders or to ask why they were given. Their job was simply to act and to die. So the six hundred members of the cavalry charged into the valley of Death.

3.

There were cannons on their right, cannons on their left, cannons in front—and they all fired loud blasts. The soldiers

were showered with gunshots and artillery shells, but they rode boldly and well into the teeth of death. The six hundred soldiers rode into Hell itself.

4.

They raised their swords in the air and their swords flashed in the light. They stabbed the enemy soldiers firing the guns. They charged an entire army—and the whole world watched in amazement and consternation. The cavalrymen dove into the smoke from the guns. They broke through the enemy line. The Russian troops were dazed, cut into pieces, by their swords. Then the cavalrymen rode back—but not all six hundred of them.

5.

There were cannons on their right, cannons on their left, cannons behind them—all of them firing loud blasts. They were showered with gunshots and artillery shells, and many of these heroes and their horses were killed—even though they had fought so well, even though they had ridden into the teeth of death and come back, back from Hell itself. That was all that was left of the six hundred riders who set out on the charge.

6.

When will their bravery be forgotten? The whole world admired their wild charge! We must respect their charge! And we must respect them, the brave six hundred men of the Light Brigade.

⊕ THEMES

🐎 BRAVERY, DUTY, AND SACRIFICE

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" celebrates an act of bravery and sacrifice—a suicidal cavalry charge during the Crimean war. Written just six weeks later, Tennyson's poem argues that the willingness of the cavalry to sacrifice themselves—without calling their orders into question—makes them heroes. The poem thus suggests that heroism isn't just about bravery but also about duty: being willing to obey orders no matter the cost.

As the speaker makes clear, the cavalry's charge is doomed from the start. They are surrounded by enemy guns, with "cannon to the right of them, / Cannon to the left of them, / Cannon in front of them." Everywhere the cavalry looks they are "stormed at with shot and shell." Against these guns, they have only "sabres bare." In other words, they just have swords—hardly as powerful or intimidating as the big artillery they're going up against.

What's more, in order to capture the guns, the soldiers have to ride all the way up to them—a distance of "half a league" (about a mile and a half). This means they have to ride a long way under artillery fire before they can even engage their enemy.

The attack is thus desperate and foolish, and the speaker fittingly describes it with horror. It is, the speaker says, like riding "into the jaws of death / Into the mouth of hell." In other words, the charge is suicidal.

The speaker suggests that the cavalry knows that their charge is doomed before they even start—but they do it anyway. The speaker notes "the soldier knew / someone had blundered." In other words, the order to charge is a mistake, a lapse in judgment—and the "soldier" knows this, even if his commander doesn't. One might expect the cavalry to object to the order, since it is a "blunder" which will get them all killed. But the speaker notes, none of the soldiers are frightened or discouraged. Instead, the speaker stresses that the cavalrymen respect their place with military hierarchy. It's not their job to come up with orders, but to execute them: "Theirs not to make reply, / Theirs not to reason why, / Theirs but to do and die."

As the poem celebrates this doomed cavalry charge—and the "hero[es]" who did it—it is thus celebrating two different things at once. On the one hand, the speaker praises the bravery of the cavalrymen, their willingness to ride into a terrifying and horrifying battle. On the other, the speaker celebrates their obedience and commitment to military hierarchy, their willingness to execute an order even if they know it's a "blunder." In this way, the poem suggests that heroism consists of both bravery and adherence to duty at once. And it subtly suggests that the blame for this military disaster does not lie with the cavalrymen themselves: they were exemplary soldiers.

Instead, the blame rests with the commanders who sent them on a suicidal mission. Though Tennyson himself supported the Crimean War, the poem might encourage readers to question the military leaders responsible for such a waste of life. But whether the reader leaves the poem in favor of the war or against it, the poem is more concerned with praising the soldiers themselves: celebrating their sacrifice, their bravery, and their commitment to their country.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8
- Between Lines 8-9
- Lines 9-17
- Between Lines 17-18
- Lines 18-26
- Between Lines 26-27
- Lines 27-38
- Between Lines 38-39
- Lines 39-49
- Between Lines 49-50
- Lines 50-55

🔍 LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

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

The first four lines of "The Charge of the Light Brigade" establish the poem's form and hint at its broader themes. The poem begins by describing a cavalry charge—six hundred British cavalrymen, the members of the "Light Brigade," ride "half a league" (about a mile and a half) into the "valley of death." This is an allusion to a real cavalry charge that happened during the Crimean War (1853-1856). During the Battle of Balaclava (1854), a British cavalry regiment charged against a well-fortified Russian artillery position; most of the cavalrymen were killed in the assault. The attack caused an outcry in England—especially because it seemed like the order to charge was given in error, a result of miscommunication between British leaders.

As the cavalry ride "half a league, half a league," they thus ride toward their deaths. The speaker hints at this by alluding to a passage from the Bible's Psalm 23: "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." The "valley of Death" that the speaker mentions in line 3—and which becomes one of the poem's refrains—is thus a place of fear and temptation. In the psalm, the speaker's faith in God protects him or her from the terrors of the "valley of the shadow of death." The cavalry faces a similarly stark and dire terror as they charge against the enemy artillery. And they withstand this terror, the speaker will eventually argue, through their unusual bravery.

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" gives its reader an immediate, intimate sense of what this cavalry charge felt like, sounded like. For instance, its meter—dactylic dimeter—sounds like the clip-clop of galloping horses (recall that a dactyl consists of an accented syllable followed by two unaccented syllables; "**All** in the | **val**ley of ..."). However, the speaker uses a lot of metrical substitutions to convey the chaos of the charge. Indeed, none of the opening four lines of the poem are metrically regular. And though the poem does occasionally use rhyme, it is similarly unpredictable, appearing at key moments in the poem and then disappearing again: none of these opening lines rhyme (though "onward" and "hundred" might be described as a slant rhyme).

The poem further captures the sound of the galloping horses with its use of epizeuxis, repeating the phrase "half a league" three times in the first line and a half of the poem. Working with the uneven meter, this repetition captures the rhythmic pounding of the light brigade's horses as they charge the enemy lines.

LINES 5-8

"Forward, the Light Brigade!
Charge for the guns!" he said.
Into the valley of Death
   Rode the six hundred.

In lines 5-8, the speaker continues to describe the light brigade's charge. The speaker starts, in lines 5-6, with the brigade receiving the order to "charge" from a commander; the speaker quotes the order directly. This commander is only identified as "he." The speaker never tells the reader any details about the commander, even though he's responsible for this suicidal order. This omission helps the reader understand the speaker's priorities. Though he acknowledges, later, that the order was "blunder," he's more interested in praising the bravery of the light brigade than in blaming their commanders.

In lines 7-8, the speaker returns to describing the bravery of the light brigade, noting how the cavalrymen "rode" "into the valley of death." (Again, this is an allusion to Psalm 23). Of course, these lines closely echo lines 3-4; both lines serve as important refrains in the poem. The repeated allusion helps the speaker stress the depth, the severity, of the danger that the light brigade faces. And the continued reference to their number, "six hundred," helps the speaker measure the human cost of this suicidal charge.

Like the first four lines, lines 5-8 are in dactylic dimeter. Line 6 is perhaps the most metrically regular line in the poem so far:

Charge for the | **guns**!" he said.

The rhythm here echoes the sound of galloping horses, the clip-clop of their hooves. And the irregularities in the meter capture the chaos of the charge, the many hooves coming into and falling out of sync. These lines also include an end rhyme: "said" in line 6 and "hundred" in line 8. Though the poem doesn't have a regular rhyme scheme, it often uses rhyme to underscore important points in the poem. In this case, the rhyme strengthens the connection between the orders—"he said"—and the fate of the "six hundred." It subtly assigns responsibility for this catastrophic charge to the commander. Though the poem avoids explicitly attacking the commander for his "blunder," it nonetheless consistently and subtly reminds the reader that this disaster is the result of human error.

LINES 9-12

"Forward, the Light Brigade!"
Was there a man dismayed?
Not though the soldier knew
   Someone had blundered.

In the poem's second stanza (lines 9-17), the speaker meditates on the light brigade's obedience, their willingness to follow orders without question, whatever the cost. The speaker

begins by repeating the commander's order, "Forward, the Light Brigade!" Then the speaker notes, via a rhetorical question, that none of the cavalrymen were "dismayed" by this order. In other words, none of them were discouraged or disheartened.

This is remarkable—all the more remarkable, since they know that the order is a mistake. As the speaker notes, "the soldier knew / someone had blundered." The enjambment at the end of line 11 conveys how disconcerting this knowledge is (especially since most of the rest of the stanza is end-stopped). In the enjambment, one almost feels the soldier's stomach sinking. It conveys the dismay that this knowledge should create—and, in that way, underlines the bravery of the "light brigade." They are not dismayed, even though they probably should be.

Stanza 2 follows the formal pattern laid out in stanza 1: like the first stanza, it is written in unrhymed dactylic dimeter. (Though, as in the previous stanza, there are plenty of metrical variations that convey the chaos of the light brigade's charge).

LINES 13-17

> *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.*

In lines 13-17, the speaker explains why the light brigade doesn't object to its orders. The cavalrymen are sensitive to their place in the military hierarchy: it's not their place to dispute their orders or to raise questions with their commanders. The speaker lays this out using a series of highly repetitive sentences:

> Theirs not to make reply,
> Theirs not to reason why,
> Theirs but to do and die.

Each sentence has the same structure; each line starts with the same word. (These lines are thus instances of parallelism and anaphora). These lines build on each other, until the speaker reaches a devastating conclusion: the role of the light brigade is simply "to do and die." In other words, it's not the soldiers' job to question or quarrel; instead, they execute the orders they receive, even if it means dying in the process. Indeed, the alliterative /d/ sound in "do" and "die" emphasize the connection between "doing" and "dying." For the members of the light brigade, the two are inextricable: to execute the orders they've received they have no choice but to die. So, the speaker notes, they ride "into the valley of death," repeating two of the poem's refrains (and, in the process, once again alluding to Psalm 23).

These lines are thus key to understanding the poem and its ideas about bravery. The light brigade is brave because they are willing to face death—and because they are unconditionally

obedient to the authority of their commanders. The poem thus suggests that bravery involves both at once: a willingness to face death and an unflinching obedience. The poem's form reflects this confidence and certainty. Lines 13-15 are strongly end-stopped. These end-stops reflect the confidence and certainty of the light brigade. These are also unusually metrically regular, in strong dactylic dimeter—unlike much of the rest of the poem, which is full of metrical substitutions. The poem's form thus subtly suggests that the speaker doesn't have any doubts about whether the light brigade did the right thing, following the orders they received—and neither does the light brigade itself. And it suggests that the speaker values—even celebrates—the soldiers' willingness to follow orders even at the price of death.

These lines break from the pattern established in the previous stanza in a key way. In the previous stanza, some of the lines are aligned with the left margin of the page and some are indented. In this stanza, every line after line 11 is indented slightly. This establishes a precedent that holds for the rest of the poem: its lines are unpredictably indented, following the speaker's whim, rather than an obvious pattern. In that way, they convey the disorder and disorganization that characterizes a fiercely fought battle.

LINES 18-21

> *Cannon to right of them,*
> *Cannon to left of them,*
> *Cannon in front of them*
> * Volleyed and thundered;*

In the first two stanzas of the poem, the speaker describes the light brigade receiving its orders and getting ready to make its suicidal charge against the Russian artillery position. In lines 18-21, the light brigade begins its charge.

The speaker stresses how dangerous this is: they are surrounded by enemy guns, on the "right," "left," and "in front" of them. All of these guns are firing: the speaker describes how they "volleyed" and "thundered." The guns aren't literally producing thunder, but their blasts sound like it; the speaker is using a metaphor, albeit a very traditional one.

One of the ways the speaker conveys the feeling of the battle is through the poem's meter. Again, the poem is written in dactylic dimeter (dactyls are poetic feet consisting of a **stressed** syllable followed by two unstressed syllables, **DUM** da da). The meter echoes the syncopated "clip-clop" of horse hooves as they pound against the earth. One can hear this meter very clearly in lines 18-20:

> **Cann**on to **right** of them,

As the charge gets underway, the speaker's meter—which has been full of metrical variations—straightens out, becomes strict and regular. This might reflect the orderly formation that the

light brigade takes as it starts its charge—a formation that breaks apart as the charge gets underway. And these lines are also very repetitive, using anaphora and parallelism. The repetitions underscore the difficult circumstances under which the light brigade begins its charge. Wherever the soldiers look, they see the same thing: enemy guns firing at them.

LINES 22-26

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.

In lines 22-26, the speaker continues to describe the light brigade's charge against an enemy artillery position—stressing the dangers the light brigade faces as well as the cavalrymen's bravery in facing those dangers. The speaker begins by noting that they are "stormed at with shot and shell." Note the alliterative /s/ and /sh/ sounds in line 22: "stormed at with shot and shell." This sibilance mimics the whooshing and whining sounds of artillery shells as they fall on the battlefield.

Despite these dangers, the light brigade rode "boldly and well." (The soldiers' bravery is subtly underlined by the assonant /o/ sound in "boldly" and "rode," which links the two words together). The speaker spends the rest of the stanza meditating on the dangers that the light brigade faces in battle.

In doing so, the speaker breaks from his or her habit elsewhere in the poem. Instead of describing the battle in direct, immediate terms, the speaker now uses more symbolic, metaphorical language—as in line 24, when the speaker compares the battlefield to the "jaws of Death." This metaphor gives death powerful teeth, teeth it uses to devour the members of the light brigade. Similarly, the speaker compares the battlefield to the "mouth of hell" in line 25, invoking hell as a symbol of torture, terror, and punishment—and suggesting that the light brigade endure such torments on the battlefield.

The stanza closes with one of the poem's refrains: "Rode the six hundred." This line repeats at the end of almost every stanza. It's important because it gives the speaker a tool with which to measure the costs of the charge: six hundred men may have ridden into the "mouth of hell," but as the speaker soon reveals, not all six hundred will ride out.

This stanza, like the previous lines of the poem, is written in dactylic dimeter (with lots of metrical variations—which, again, suggest the chaos of the battle). Though the poem doesn't have a set rhyme scheme, these lines do contain three rhymes: "shell," "well," and "hell." "Shell" and "hell" contrast strongly with "well." In doing so, the rhymes subtly underline the skill of the light brigade: they ride "well" even though they are in "hell," with artillery "shell[s]" raining down on them.

LINES 27-31

Flashed all their sabres bare,
Flashed as they turned in air
Sabring the gunners there,
Charging an army, while
  All the world wondered.

After charging through the "valley of death," with artillery shells raining down on the soldiers, the light brigade finally reaches its destination in lines 27-31: the Russian artillery position. As they arrive, they raise their sabres (a kind of sword) in the air; the steel of the swords catches the light, "flash[ing]." This is a subtle detail that helps to convey the battle to the reader. Alongside the speaker's careful attention to the battle's chaotic sound, the reader thus gets a direct, immediate sense of what the battle looked like.

Then the members of the light brigade attack the Russian troops, stabbing them with their "sabres." The assonant /a/ sounds in these lines—in words like "sabre," "bare," and "air"—are as sharp and cutting as the swords themselves: once again, the sound of the poem helps the reader imagine the reality of the battle, its violence.

But in lines 30-31, the speaker pulls back briefly from the battle itself. The speaker notes that the "world wondered" at the light brigade's charge. The speaker suggests that the "world" is impressed by the bravery of the light brigade: the cavalrymen are willing to face down an entire "army" with just a few light swords, "sabres," to defend themselves. The speaker thus subtly hints that—although the poem describes the battle directly and immediately, almost as though the speaker were present for it—the speaker is actually describing something that already happened, something that the "world" has had time to consider and to admire.

Like the previous stanzas, stanza 4 is written in dactylic dimeter, with regular metrical substitutions. The poem does not have a regular rhyme scheme, though lines 27-29 all rhyme: "bare," "air," and "there." The speaker slows down in these lines, describing the cavalrymen raising their swords and then attacking the Russian gunners with them—breaking up a single act into several movements, almost as though in slow motion. At the same time, the rhyme binds together these separate moments into one continuous action that is fluid, graceful, and violent.

LINES 31-36

  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.

In lines 31-36, the speaker continues to describe the light

brigade's assault on the Russian gunners. After briefly pulling back from the battle itself—to note that the "world wondered" at the bravery of the light brigade—the speaker returns in line 32 to the intimate, immediate details of the battle.

The speaker describes the "smoke" from the guns that hangs over the battlefield—and the light brigade "plung[ing]" fearlessly into it. To "plunge" is to dive into something, and the word's use here indicates both the thickness of the smoke and the unflinching bravery of the soldiers.

The speaker describes the assault as a success. The light brigade breaks through the Russian lines, cutting down "Cossack and Russian" troops: they are "shattered and sundered," cut to pieces. (The Cossacks are an ethnic group from southern Russia who fought as part of the Russian empire in the Crimean war.) The troops are discombobulated, knocked off their feet by the attack: the speaker describes them "reel[ing]." The enjambment in line 34 mimics this feeling of being off-kilter: it feels like the line itself is "reel[ing]."

Like the rest of the poem, these lines are in rough dactylic dimeter with occasional, irregular rhymes—like the rhyme between "smoke," "broke," and "stroke" in lines 32, 33, and 35. Further, the poem is full of harsh consonant sounds. Note, for instance, the consonant /b/, /r/, /t/, and /k/ sounds in lines 32-33:

> Plunged in the **b**a**tt**e**r**y-smo**k**e
> **R**i**g**h**t** through the line they **b**ro**k**e;

The lines bristle with consonance. It sounds harsh and violent—as harsh and violent as the scene it describes. This is another instance of a broad pattern in the poem. The poem uses its sound and rhythm to give the reader a sense of what the battle was like. And in that way, it brings the reader into the experience of the battle, makes it feel immediate and intimate—as though the reader were riding alongside the members of the light brigade.

LINES 37-38

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

In the final two lines of stanza 4, the speaker describes the light brigade riding back from its charge. The speaker begins with a straightforward statement: "Then they rode back." This almost seems positive—they've endured an enormous and terrifying challenge and now they're heading home. But there's a caesura in the middle of line 37. That caesura serves as a pivot: the speaker uses it to reflect on the tragic human cost of the light brigade's charge. They may have broken through the Russian lines "but not / not the six hundred" return from the attack. In other words, the light brigade has suffered heavy casualties. The refrain—which appears throughout the poem—helps to register the change in the light brigade's numbers, the costs of

its brave and suicidal assault.

The speaker struggles to accept this outcome: the caesura in the middle of line 37, the enjambment at the end of the line, and the repetition of the word "not" at the start of line 38 all suggest that the speaker is having a hard time simply admitting to the reader how costly this attack really was. The speaker wants to celebrate the bravery of the light brigade, not dwell on its losses. In the end, the speaker simply acknowledges that not *all* of the six hundred returned: the speaker doesn't provide a precise count (or even a rough estimate) of the dead. The reader gets a sense of the scale of the tragedy only through the speaker's reticence and struggle to announce the full costs of the light brigade's charge.

As is often the case in the poem, these lines are hardly in the poem's dominant meter, dactylic dimeter. Line 37, for instance, does not contain any dactyls at all:

> **Then** they **rode back,** but **not**

Elsewhere in the poem, the metrical variations convey the chaos of the cavalry's charge. Here they suggest the distress the speaker experiences while reflecting on the human costs of that charge. And they further suggest that the speaker is upset, moved, and disturbed by the sacrifice the light brigade has made.

LINES 39-42

> *Cannon to right of them,*
> *Cannon to left of them,*
> *Cannon behind them*
> * Volleyed and thundered;*

In lines 39-42, the light brigade continues to retreat after breaking through the Russian lines. These lines are almost identical to lines 18-21. Like lines 18-21, the speaker stresses here that the light brigade is surrounded by enemy artillery, inundated with its fire. (Only this time, there's cannon "behind" instead of "in front" of the light brigade). They may have broken through the enemy lines, but they haven't defeated them—and as soon as they retreat, the Russian artillery begins to fire on them again: to volley and thunder. These lines thus suggest that the light brigade's charge has failed: the enemy remains in control of its artillery.

Like lines 18-21, these lines are in very strong dactylic dimeter. And they are very repetitive: lines 39-41 all have parallel structures. The parallels between these lines underscore the terrifying situation the light brigade is in, the way the soldiers are surrounded by enemy cannons. And the repetition of lines 18-21, almost exactly, emphasizes the failure of their attack: it has not fundamentally changed anything—certainly not the dangers the light brigade has to negotiate as it retreats.

LINES 43-49

> *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.*

In lines 43-49, the speaker continues to describe the light brigade's retreat. And as in lines 39-42, the speaker does so by [repeating](#), almost exactly, the language used to describe the soldiers' initial charge (in lines 22-26). As in lines 22-26, the light brigade is inundated with enemy fire—"stormed at with shot and shell." ("Stormed" functions here in the same way it did in line 22: as a [metaphor](#) to describe the sound of the enemy cannons and the overwhelming fire that the light brigade endures.)

In lines 44-45, the speaker breaks from the repetition of lines 22-26 and introduces a new detail: the speaker dwells, for a brief moment, on the effects of the artillery, how it kills "horse and hero" even though they had "fought so well." This is a painful detail: despite their skill and bravery, despite their willingness to follow orders, the cavalrymen have suffered and continue to suffer heavy casualties.

At the same time, the [consonant](#) /l/ sound which appears in the rhyme words "she**l**l," "fe**l**l," and "we**l**l," as well as in "whi**l**e," "a**l**l," and "**l**eft" emphasizes their accomplishment: despite the incredible difficulties they faced, they have still fought "well." Indeed, repeating the metaphors and [symbols](#) from lines 22-26, the speaker notes that they have come through "the jaws of Death"— they are "back from the mouth of hell." They have endured torments so severe they seem like hell itself: they have escaped death, its ravenous hunger and powerful jaws.

The stanza ends, like all of the poem's stanzas, with a [refrain](#). Like the refrain at the end of the previous stanza, this one serves to remind the reader of the human costs of their charge. Six hundred members of the light brigade set out, but not all of them come back.

Like the rest of the poem, these lines are in rough dactylic [dimeter](#). Though the poem doesn't have a set [rhyme scheme](#), these lines contain a fair amount of [rhyme](#)—with "shell," "fell," "well," and "hell" all rhyming. (And since this rhyme largely relies on consonance, it is reinforced by the consonance /l/ sounds that pop up elsewhere in the stanza, in words like "all" and "left"). As a result of the repetitions and the rhymes, the poem feels like a piece of military music: a march designed to motivate the troops. It is highly musical, energetic; it attempts to inspire—both through its depiction of bravery and through its rousing sonic energy.

LINES 50-55

> *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!*

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" ends with a brief final [stanza](#). (The final stanza of the poem is just six lines long—all the other stanzas have at least nine lines.) Throughout the poem the speaker has tried to describe the light brigade's charge in direct, immediate terms—to give the reader the sense that they are riding alongside the soldiers, hearing the syncopated beats of the horses' hooves, seeing the swords flash in the light, smelling the smoke from the Russian artillery.

But, in this final stanza, the speaker turns away from the battle itself and considers how the light brigade will be remembered. Repeating a line from earlier in the poem, the speaker notes that the "world wondered" at its "wild charge." In other words, the whole world was impressed by the soldiers' bravery. Indeed, the speaker is confident that their bravery is so impressive that their "glory" will never "fade." In other words, the speaker believes that people will always remember the light brigade—that they will come to serve as an example of what bravery, at its best, looks like. And the speaker exhorts the reader to do the same: to "Honour the charge they made!" The speaker thus hopes the poem itself will help preserve the memory of the light brigade.

The final stanza of the poem follows the formal pattern established in the previous five stanzas. It is in rough [dactylic dimeter](#). It doesn't have a set [rhyme scheme](#), but it does use rhyme regularly: lines 50, 51, 53, and 54 all rhyme (fade/made/Brigade); so do lines 52 and 55 (wondered/hundred), albeit with a different [rhyme](#) sound. All of these lines are also [end-stopped](#). These strongly rhymed, end-stopped lines reflect the speaker's confidence: the speaker doesn't admit any doubt about the immortal glory the light brigade will enjoy for its "wild charge."

�֎ SYMBOLS

☠ JAWS OF DEATH

In line 24 (and later in line 46), the speaker describes the light brigade riding into the "jaws of Death." This isn't literally true—death doesn't actually have jaws! Rather, it's a [metaphor](#) and a [symbol](#) wrapped up together. The metaphor compares death to a ravenous, hungry creature with terrifying jaws that threaten to tear apart the six hundred members of the light brigade. More broadly, the "jaws of Death" serve as a symbol for the battlefield itself—perhaps even for the horrors

of war on the whole. They present the battlefield as a terrifying place where death is almost inevitable. In doing so, this symbol emphasizes the bravery of the six hundred: they know that they are riding to their deaths, but they do it anyway. The symbol thus stresses the danger and terror that surrounds the light brigade's charge—but it also emphasizes their bravery in *confronting* that danger.

> **Where this symbol appears in the poem:**
> - **Line 24:** "jaws of Death"
> - **Line 46:** "jaws of Death"

⚒ POETIC DEVICES

END-STOPPED LINE

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" is a strongly end-stopped poem. These end-stops convey the resolve and bravery of the light brigade as it faces death in its suicidal charge. They also convey the strength of the poet's belief in these soldiers. For instance, lines 13-15 are all strongly end-stopped:

> Theirs not to make reply,
> Theirs not to reason why,
> Theirs but to do and die.

These lines describe the light brigade's response to its orders. Even though those orders are evidently a "blunder," the soldiers don't dispute them. They simply follow orders and grimly do their duty. The strong end-stops in these lines convey the determination of the cavalrymen, their unwillingness to entertain doubt: like the cavalrymen themselves, these lines are strong, confident, and unequivocal.

That confidence reappears in the final stanza of the poem (lines 50-55), which is entirely end-stopped. In this stanza, the speaker discusses how the light brigade will be remembered:

> When can their glory fade?
> O the wild charge they made!
> All the world wondered.

The speaker is confident that the light brigade will always be remembered, that its glory will never fade. And that confidence is reflected in the strongly end-stopped lines. There is no room for doubt in these powerful and direct lines. The use of end-stop in the poem thus reflects its fundamental concern: it helps the speaker describe the bravery of the light brigade and to convey his confidence that they have won immortal glory through their sacrifice.

> **Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "league,"
- **Line 2:** "onward,"
- **Line 4:** "hundred."
- **Line 5:** "Brigade!"
- **Line 6:** "said."
- **Line 8:** "hundred."
- **Line 9:** "Brigade!""
- **Line 10:** "dismayed?"
- **Line 12:** "blundered."
- **Line 13:** "reply,"
- **Line 14:** "why,"
- **Line 15:** "die."
- **Line 17:** "hundred."
- **Line 18:** "them,"
- **Line 19:** "them,"
- **Line 21:** "thundered;"
- **Line 22:** "shell,"
- **Line 23:** "well,"
- **Line 24:** "Death,"
- **Line 26:** "hundred."
- **Line 27:** "bare,"
- **Line 29:** "there,"
- **Line 31:** "wondered."
- **Line 33:** "broke;"
- **Line 36:** "sundered."
- **Line 38:** "hundred."
- **Line 39:** "them,"
- **Line 40:** "them,"
- **Line 42:** "thundered;"
- **Line 43:** "shell,"
- **Line 44:** "fell."
- **Line 46:** "Death,"
- **Line 47:** "hell,"
- **Line 48:** "them,"
- **Line 49:** "hundred."
- **Line 50:** "fade?"
- **Line 51:** "made!"
- **Line 52:** "wondered."
- **Line 53:** "made!"
- **Line 54:** "Brigade,"
- **Line 55:** "hundred!"

ENJAMBMENT

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" uses relatively few enjambments—meaning that when these enjambments do appear, they feel particularly noteworthy and significant. For example, note the enjambment in line 11:

> Not though the soldier **knew**
> **Someone** had blundered.

The lines surrounding line 11 are end-stopped, making line 11

sticks out. And it does so for good reason: in this line and the next, the speaker acknowledges that the cavalrymen know that their orders—to launch a suicidal charge against a Russian artillery position—are, at best, a "blunder." The enjambment mimics the distress that knowledge causes them: in comparison to the confident and enclosed lines around it, line 11 feels deflated, as though something is sinking or falling out of alignment. The enjambment thus imitates the effect that the knowledge has on the soldiers.

There are places in the poem where the enjambments become more regular—for instance, stanza 4 (lines 27-38), which contains 6 enjambments in 12 lines. This stanza relies more heavily on enjambment for good reason. The speaker is discussing the moment in the battle when the light brigade finally engages with the enemy. After so many end-stopped lines, these lines feel as chaotic and unpredictable as the battle itself. For example, lines 34-36 mimic the effect that the light brigades' "sabres" have on the "Cossack and Russian" troops:

> [They] reeled from the sabre **stroke**
> **Shattered** and sundered.

Like those troops, these lines also "reel," as though they were being knocked about. Enjambment thus stands in strong contrast with the way end-stop works in the poem. Where end-stop registers confidence and bravery, enjambment registers the unpleasant side of war: the fear and confusion the cavalrymen feel when presented with their orders; the chaotic violence of their attack on the Russian troops.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "Death /   Rode"
- **Lines 7-8:** "Death /   Rode"
- **Lines 11-12:** "knew /   Someone"
- **Lines 16-17:** "Death /   Rode"
- **Lines 20-21:** "them /   Volleyed"
- **Lines 25-26:** "hell /   Rode"
- **Lines 28-29:** "air / Sabring"
- **Lines 30-31:** "while /   All"
- **Lines 32-33:** "smoke / Right"
- **Lines 34-35:** "Russian / Reeled"
- **Lines 35-36:** "stroke /   Shattered"
- **Lines 37-38:** "not /   Not"
- **Lines 41-42:** "them /   Volleyed"
- **Lines 45-46:** "well / Came"

CAESURA

The lines of "The Charge of the Light Brigade" are pretty short, with, on average, only about six syllables per line. As a result, there isn't a lot of caesura in the poem; the lines just aren't long enough for a whole lot of mid-line pauses to pop up! But there are a few—and they often play an important role in the poem.

For instance, note the caesura in lines 37-38:

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

In these lines, the light brigade retreats from its battle with the Russian artillery position. The speaker begins with a relatively straight forward pronouncement: "Then they rode back." This almost sounds good—they're coming home! But the speaker pauses. After the caesura, the speaker reminds the reader of the incredible human cost of this charge: not all of the six hundred soldiers who set out will get to ride home. (The enjambment at the end of line 37 underscores the somber tone of the line: the speaker almost seems to lose confidence while reflecting on the human cost of the charge). The caesura is thus a key turning point in the line, where the speaker turns from the straightforward—even encouraging—description of the battle itself to a more sober accounting of the price the "six hundred" pay for their bravery.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** ", "
- **Line 5:** ", "
- **Line 6:** "!""
- **Line 9:** ", "
- **Line 30:** ", "
- **Line 37:** ", "

ALLITERATION

Throughout "The Charge of the Light Brigade," the speaker uses alliteration to underline the bravery of the cavalrymen who make this suicidal charge—and to stress the horrors that they face as they ride into battle. For instance, listen to the alliterative /d/ sound in line 15:

> Theirs but to **d**o and **d**ie.

In this line, the speaker praises the light brigade soldiers for their unhesitating obedience to the orders they receive—even when those orders are obviously wrong. They simply "do" what they're told; they accept that they might "die" in performing those orders. The alliteration emphasizes their obedience by linking together "do" and "die," and also suggests that there is no real *difference* between "doing" and "dying" in this case: they will die if they perform the order to charge. And in that way, the alliteration subtly hints at their bravery: they charge even though to do so is to die.

Once the cavalrymen start their charge, the poem uses alliteration to emphasize the chaos and horror of battle. Line 22 uses a series of alliterative /sh/ sounds to capture the whining of the artillery shells as they fall in and around the ranks of the cavalrymen; they were "Stormed at with **sh**ot and

shell." The /sh/ sounds capture the sound of the battle, the whistling sounds that artillery shells make as they fall through the air.

The alliteration of "horse" and "hero" then underscores the sheer horror of warfare by implicitly connecting the men to animals: in the face of all these bullets, the heroes are no safer than the steeds they ride (note that this is further bolstered by the consonant /r/ sound in the middle of these words). Earlier in the poem, the alliteration echoed the bravery of the light brigade; here it captures the chaotic and terrifying experience of battle.

> **Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Line 2:** "o"
> - **Line 3:** "A"
> - **Line 11:** "s"
> - **Line 12:** "S"
> - **Line 15:** "d," "d"
> - **Line 22:** "sh," "sh"
> - **Line 30:** "wh"
> - **Line 31:** "w," "w"
> - **Line 32:** "b"
> - **Line 33:** "R," "b," "r"
> - **Line 34:** "R"
> - **Line 35:** "R," "s," "s"
> - **Line 36:** "s"
> - **Line 37:** "Th," "th," "b," "b," "n"
> - **Line 38:** "N"
> - **Line 43:** "sh," "sh"
> - **Line 44:** "h," "h"
> - **Line 45:** "Th," "th"
> - **Line 46:** "th," "th"
> - **Line 50:** "Wh"
> - **Line 51:** "w"
> - **Line 52:** "w," "w"

ASSONANCE

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" does not use very much assonance. But when it does, the device emphasizes the bravery of the light brigade as well as the chaos and violence of their charge. For instance, the speaker uses a strong /o/ sound in line 23:

> Boldly they rode and well

The speaker is describing the light brigade riding into battle under heavy fire from Russian artillery (the soldiers have enemy cannons to the "right, "left" and "in front of them." Yet despite this intimidating barrage, the soldiers nonetheless ride "boldly into battle." The /o/ sound in line 23 emphasizes their "bold[ness]" and links it to the way the soldiers "rode." Indeed, the assonance here makes the two seem indivisible, as though

they have no choice but to ride "boldly": it's simply who they are, how they do things. In this way, the assonance subtly emphasizes the soldiers' bravery as they face certain death.

When the light brigade finally reaches the Russian artillery and engages, the speaker uses two separate but similar /a/ sounds—an /ah/ and a long /ay/ to describe their swords:

> Flashed all their sabres bare,
> Flashed as they turned in air.

These sounds almost seem to capture the bright gleams that radiate from their swords as they raise them in the air. It also captures their cutting, dangerous quality: the /a/ sound that appears in "sabres," "bare," and "air" is itself cutting, astringent (a quality which is reinforced by the consonant /r/ sound with which it's consistently paired—and into which it blends.) Finally, the influx of very similar—but not exactly the same—sounds might feel a bit overwhelming or disorienting, much like the battle being described. Here, then, the assonance switches function: instead of describing the bravery of the light brigade, it captures the violence of their engagement with the Russian troops.

> **Where Assonance appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Line 2:** "o"
> - **Line 3:** "A"
> - **Line 11:** "ou," "o"
> - **Line 12:** "o," "o," "u"
> - **Line 15:** "o," "o"
> - **Line 20:** "o," "o"
> - **Line 23:** "o," "o"
> - **Line 27:** "a," "a"
> - **Line 28:** "a," "a," "ey," "ai"
> - **Line 29:** "a," "e"
> - **Line 30:** "a," "a"
> - **Line 37:** "o"
> - **Line 38:** "o"
> - **Line 45:** "a," "a"
> - **Line 48:** "e," "e"
> - **Line 49:** "e"

CONSONANCE

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" uses a lot of consonance—especially in comparison to its relatively restrained use of alliteration and assonance. There's a good reason for that: the speaker uses harsh, repeated consonant sounds to convey the violence, chaos, and destruction of the light brigade's suicidal charge. For instance, note the consonant /b/, /r/, and /k/ sounds in lines 32-35:

> ... battery-smoke
> Right through the line they broke;

Cossack and Russian
Reeled from the sabre stroke

These are full of tough, hard consonants. They feel as harsh and violent as the scene they describe.

The most recurrent sound throughout the poem, though, is clearly the /d/ sound. This is a heavy, voiced consonant—one that resonates and buzzes each time it appears. Its frequent use throughout the poem imbues the lines with a thundering, epic quality that is in keeping with the battle being described. Of course, this sound is also closely associated with the word "Death" from the first stanza onward. As such, its recurrence subtly evokes the towering presence of death throughout the poem. It also appears in the refrain of "Rode the six hundred," closely linking the soldiers themselves to death (indeed, their only purpose, the poem insists, being "to do and die").

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "ll," "ll," "D"
- **Line 4:** "d," "d," "d"
- **Line 7:** "D"
- **Line 8:** "d," "d," "d"
- **Line 9:** "d"
- **Line 10:** "m," "d," "m," "d"
- **Line 11:** "N," "th," "th," "s," "d," "kn," "w"
- **Line 12:** "S," "o," "n," "d," "n," "d," "d"
- **Line 13:** "r," "r"
- **Line 14:** "r," "r"
- **Line 15:** "d," "d," "d"
- **Line 16:** "D"
- **Line 17:** "d," "d," "d"
- **Line 21:** "d," "n," "d," "n," "d," "d"
- **Line 22:** "t," "t," "sh," "t," "sh," "ll"
- **Line 23:** "l," "d," "l," "d," "d," "ll"
- **Line 24:** "D"
- **Line 26:** "d," "d," "d"
- **Line 27:** "r," "b," "r," "b," "r"
- **Line 28:** "r," "r"
- **Line 29:** "r," "r," "r"
- **Line 30:** "r," "r," "wh," "l"
- **Line 31:** "ll," "w," "r," "ld," "w," "d," "r," "d"
- **Line 32:** "b," "r," "k"
- **Line 33:** "R," "r," "br," "k"
- **Line 34:** "C," "ck," "R"
- **Line 35:** "R," "r," "s," "r," "s," "r," "k"
- **Line 36:** "r," "d," "nd," "s," "nd," "r," "d"
- **Line 37:** "Th," "th," "r," "d," "b," "b," "t," "n," "t"
- **Line 38:** "N," "t," "n," "d," "d"
- **Line 41:** "nd"
- **Line 42:** "d," "n," "d," "nd," "d"
- **Line 43:** "d," "sh," "sh," "ll"
- **Line 44:** "l," "h," "r," "h," "r," "ll"
- **Line 45:** "Th," "th"
- **Line 46:** "th," "th"
- **Line 47:** "th," "th," "ll"
- **Line 48:** "ll," "th," "l," "ft," "th"
- **Line 49:** "L," "ft"
- **Line 50:** "d"
- **Line 51:** "w," "l," "d," "d"
- **Line 52:** "ll," "w," "ld," "w," "d," "d"
- **Line 54:** "B"
- **Line 55:** "b"

ALLUSION

In line 3, the speaker describes the light brigade riding into "the valley of Death." (This line repeats in lines 7 and 16, becoming one of the poem's refrains.) The line is an allusion to the Psalm 23 in the Bible. In this psalm, the speaker expresses his or her religious faith and confidence that God will protect him or her even against death itself. The speaker says, "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

The "valley of death" into which the light brigade rides is closely related to the biblical "valley of the shadow of death." Like the "valley of the shadow of death," the "valley of death" in the poem is a terrifying place—terrifying enough that it threatens the faith of the people who "walk" through it. The allusion thus subtly reinforces the bravery of the light brigade—they maintain their bravery even in this terrifying place.

More broadly, the poem alludes to a real cavalry charge that took place during the Crimean War (1853-56). During the Battle of Balaclava (1854), a British cavalry regiment received a set of erroneous orders due to confusion among the commanding officers. As a result, they charged against a highly fortified Russian artillery position; most of them died in the attack. The disaster caused a public outcry in England about the way the war was being handled. Tennyson published the poem only six weeks after the attack.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "All in the valley of Death"
- **Line 7:** "the valley of Death"
- **Line 16:** "the valley of Death"

REPETITION

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" is a very repetitive poem. At various points in the poem, it draws on devices like anaphora, epizeuxis, parallelism, and refrain. This gives the poem a very musical feel: it almost sounds like a military march or a patriotic song, an anthem. And it also reflects the sound of the charge and the ensuing battle: the repetitions echo the sound of the horses galloping across the plains.

Let's take a look at each kind of repetition independently,

starting with epizeuxis. There's a good example of epizeuxis in the poem's first line:

> Half a league, half a league

The repetition of the same phrase back-to-back emphasizes how far the light brigade has to ride. (A "league" is about three miles, so the light brigade has about a mile and a half to cover before they reach the enemy guns.) But it also captures the rhythm of their charge, the clip-clop of galloping horses. The repetition thus helps give the reader a sense of the way the battle sounded; it helps the reader feel like they're really there, in the heart of the battlefield, with the light brigade.

After the first two lines, the speaker then uses a series of refrains. For instance, the line "rode the six hundred" repeats throughout the poem. It usually appears as the last line in each [stanza](link). By returning to this line over and over again, the speaker tracks the light brigade as they charge and retreat—including the casualties they suffered. Compare the way the refrain works in lines 7-8:

> Into the valley of Death
> Rode the six hundred

To lines 37-38:

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

The subtle changes in the refrains emphasize the tragic results of the light brigade's charge: six hundred ride into "the valley of death" but not all "six hundred" ride out—many die in the charge. The refrain emphasizes the costs of war and the high price the light brigade pays for their bravery. Several other lines in the first stanza also become refrains for the poem, including "all in the valley of Death" (line 3) and "Forward, the light Brigade!" (line 5).

In the next stanza, the speaker turns to anaphora and parallelism:

> Theirs not to make reply,
> Theirs not to reason why,
> Theirs but to do and die.

Each line starts with the same phrase and uses a parallel sentence structure. As a result these phrases build on each other—until the speaker reaches a devastating conclusion: "Theirs but to do and die." In other words, because the light brigade doesn't object to their orders, they have no choice but to ride into death. The repetition thus builds a sense of inevitability: they have no choice. The speaker thus uses a variety of different kinds of repetition to create an enveloping

sense of the world of the charge of the light brigade, from the sounds of battle to the costs of war.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 4-8
- Line 9
- Lines 13-17
- Lines 18-22
- Lines 24-26
- Line 27
- Line 28
- Line 31
- Lines 37-38
- Lines 39-43
- Lines 46-49
- Line 52
- Line 53
- Line 54
- Line 55

METAPHOR

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" describes a real cavalry charge, which took place during the Crimean War (1853-56). The poem was written just six weeks afterwards; in it, the speaker tries to describe it as precisely and literally as possible, to give the reader the feeling that they are present with the light brigade on the battlefield. As a result, the speaker largely avoids [metaphor](link). Metaphors might take the reader out of the immediacy of battle.

And when the speaker does use metaphors, they tend to be small, local, and often traditional—so traditional that they might not even register *as* metaphors. For instance, in line 21 the speaker describes how the cannons "thundered." The cannons don't literally produce thunder, but their blasts do *sound* like thunder. This is a metaphor, but it's so widely and regularly used that it probably doesn't feel like one—it doesn't have any of the surprise and ingenuity that usually accompanies metaphor. But the next line extends the metaphor just a little: the speaker describes the cannons "storm[ing]" at the light brigade. This metaphor is similar to the previous one—like "thundered" it compares the cannon blasts to a storm. But it's just a little bit stranger, a little bit more unusual—and as a result it reminds the reader that the previous metaphor *is* itself metaphorical.

The poem does contain a few wilder and more adventurous metaphors, as when, in line 24-25, the speaker describes the battlefield as "the jaws of Death." The metaphor gives Death jaws: makes it into a ravenous, hungry creature that gobbles up the members of the light brigade. It is thus a brief—and fantastical—break from the rest of the poem, which is resolutely straightforward and literal in its description of the

horrors of war.

> **Where Metaphor appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Line 21:** "thundered"
> - **Line 22:** "Stormed"
> - **Line 24:** "the jaws of Death"
> - **Line 25:** "the mouth of hell"
> - **Line 32:** "Plunged in the battery-smoke"
> - **Line 42:** "thundered"
> - **Line 43:** "Stormed"
> - **Line 46:** "the jaws of Death"
> - **Line 47:** "the mouth of hell"

🗏 VOCABULARY

League (Line 1, Line 2) - A distance of about half a mile.

Light Brigade (Line 5, Line 9, Line 54) - A cavalry unit in the British army during the Crimean War.

Dismayed (Line 10) - Discouraged or disheartened.

Blundered (Line 12) - Made a mistake. In other words, the Light Brigade has received incorrect or foolish orders.

Volleyed (Line 21, Line 42) - Fired. The cannons are firing together against the Light Brigade.

Shell (Line 22, Line 43) - An artillery round, a cannon ball.

Flashed (Line 27, Line 28) - Displayed. Because the swords are made of steel, they also catch the sun, creating bright flashes of reflected light.

Sabres (Line 27, Line 35) - A light sword, carried by the cavalry.

Plunged (Line 32) - Rode into.

Battery-smoke (Line 32) - The smoke from the cannons.

Cossack (Line 34) - An ethnic group from South-Eastern Russia. As part of the Russian Empire, Cossacks fought against the British alongside the Russians in the Crimean War.

Reeled (Line 35) - Stumbled. The Russian troops are knocked off their feet by the cavalry.

Sundered (Line 36) - Cut into pieces.

⏱ FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" is made up of six stanzas of varying lengths, marked by Roman numerals. Each stanza is like a little chapter in the story of the Light Brigade and its doomed mission, though the language throughout the poem is very repetitive. The speaker relies on refrains, anaphora, and parallelism to give the poem a sense of cohesion and structure even as it does not follow a set form (such as the sonnet or the villanelle).

At the same time, though, the lack of a clear form balances out this intense repetition, keeping the poem from becoming too steady or predictable. Rhymes come and go; the stanzas are often radically different lengths. The first stanza, for instance, is eight lines long, but the next is nine. The fourth stanza, meanwhile, has twelve lines, and the final stanza has only six. As a result, the stanzas feel uneven, contracting and expanding unpredictably.

The same is true of the lines themselves. Though most of them are around six syllables, some are indented and some aren't. And there doesn't seem to be any pattern to which lines are indented and which aren't. For example, in the first three stanzas of the poem, the fourth line of each stanza is indented (lines 4, 12, and 21). But in the fourth stanza, line 30 isn't indented. The poem once again feels uneven, unpredictable, even chaotic. This chaos isn't random or unplanned. Rather, the speaker uses it to imitate the chaos of battle itself. The poem feels like a cavalry charge, with all its dissonant sounds and uneven rhythms. In other words, the lack of a set form is part of the point: it helps the poem capture the way the light brigade's charge felt and sounded.

METER

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" is written in dactylic dimeter. Dactyls are poetic feet with a DUM da da rhythm, and dimeter means there are two such feet in each line. It's easy to hear this rhythm in lines 18-20:

> Cannon to | right of them,
> Cannon to | left of them,
> Cannon in | front of them

This is a pretty unusual meter. Most English poets favor meters with only two syllables in each foot—iambic or trochaic meters. They tend to use three-syllable feet—things like dactyls, amphibrachs, and anapests—only as metrical variations, as ways to switch up those more standard meters. For one thing, it's hard to write a poem in dactyls. Few people have done it. But Tennyson chose this meter for a specific and important reason: it sounds like galloping horses. The meter captures the syncopated "clip-clop" of a cavalry charge, as hundreds of horses race toward a target. The poem thus imitates the sound of the charge it describes: it becomes an echo of the charge of the light brigade.

The meter is definitely not perfect, though. As might be expected for a poem that describes a chaotic and ultimately disastrous cavalry charge, it contains moments of irregularity. One of those moments appears in line 3:

> All in the | valley of | death.

The line is seven syllables long, instead of the six one would normally expect in a line of dactylic dimeter. And the last syllable—the word "death"—is stressed. So it feels like the start of a new foot altogether. (This is called a "masculine ending"). This is an important metrical variation because this line—with some slight variations becomes one of the poem's refrains, reappearing as line 7 and 16. It's striking that the speaker would use a line that doesn't quite follow the poem's meter as one of its refrains. It suggests that metrical variation is not a problem but part of the point: it reflects the chaotic, disordered event the poem describes. This applies to the poem's other metrical variations as well. The poem uses such variations to capture the chaotic sounds of a disastrous charge.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" does not have a set rhyme scheme, but it does use rhyme often. The poem thus feels a bit uneven, even chaotic—with rhymes appearing suddenly and disappearing just as suddenly. This is intentional. The speaker uses rhyme in this chaotic way to capture the chaos of the cavalry charge the poem describes. Like the charge, the poem is cacophonous and disorganized.

But the speaker is also careful and intention about where and when rhyme appears. Though the poem *sounds* chaotic, it often uses its rhymes to create strong connections between important moments and ideas. Note, for instance, the rhyme between "hundred" in line 4 and "said" in line 6. It's a subtle rhyme, given that it depends on the unaccented part of "hun*dred*," but nevertheless quietly strengthens the connection between the two lines: the "six hundred" ride into the "valley of death" because "he said" to do so—because their commander ordered them to do so. The rhyme creates a link between the command and its consequence, the order and its effect. And, coming in the poem's first stanza, it creates an expectation: readers might expect that the fourth and sixth lines of the next stanza will also rhyme.

But they don't. Line 12 ends with the word "blundered"; line 15 with the word "why." These words don't rhyme at all. The speaker introduces rhyme in a different place in this stanza, now rhyming lines 13-16, the fifth-seventh lines of the stanza. These lines deal with the cavalrymen's duty—"to do and die"—so it makes sense that the lines would be linked together through rhyme. The speaker thus uses rhyme with purpose and intent—underscoring important connections—but the rhymes themselves never settle into a predictable set scheme. Instead, in their unpredictable appearances and disappearances, they mimic the chaos of the battle they describe.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Charge of the Light Brigade" is anonymous, the reader never learning his or her gender, profession, class,

etc. The poem is almost entirely devoid of personal details or any kind of revealing hints that would offer tantalizing clues about the speaker's life. Indeed, the only thing one can say about the speaker with any confidence is that he or she supports England in the Crimean War: the speaker seems patriotic, even nationalistic, in his or her praise of the valor and bravery of the British cavalry.

The absence of meaningful details about the speaker is intentional and important. This poem is not *about* its speaker. It is about the "Light Brigade" and its bravery as it faces certain death charging against a Russian artillery position. The speaker describes the charge with precise details: it almost feels like the speaker was present for it, observed it. However, the speaker makes it clear that he or she was *not* a member of the Light Brigade. The speaker refers to them as a separate group of people. For instance, in lines 13-15, he uses the word "their" rather than "our" to describe their obedience to their military superiors: "*Theirs* not to make reply…" The speaker thus removes him or herself from the poem in order to better focus on the cavalrymen: their bravery and heroism facing death.

SETTING

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" is set on a battlefield in the Crimean War (1853-56). It describes a real cavalry charge that happened during the Battle of Balaclava on October 25, 1854—a charge that ended in disaster, with most of the British cavalry killed in action.

The poem vividly describes the environment of the battle: the gunshots and artillery shells that rain down on the soldiers as they charge, the smoke of the guns, the swords flashing in the air. As a result, the reader gets a vivid sense of the battle: the way it looked, smelled, and sounded. It almost feels like the speaker is present at the battle, listening to the horses' hooves, smelling the smoke from the cannons.

Yet the speaker of the poem is careful to distinguish him or herself from the cavalry: the speaker is *not* a member of the "light brigade." Instead, the speaker is reflecting on the charge after the fact—as a military disaster, as an instance of exceptional bravery, and as an occasion to reflect on the handling of the Crimean War more broadly. The immediacy with which the speaker describes the battle is thus a little bit deceiving: the poem is distant enough from the events it describes to allow for reflection—and critique.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

When he wrote "The Charge of the Light Brigade," Alfred Lord Tennyson was the English poet laureate—a position of power

and prestige in British society. For both his contemporaries and modern readers, Tennyson was/is thus considered the preeminent Victorian poet—the poet who most embodies the virtues and vices of his own literary moment.

The Victorian period lasted from 1837 to 1901, the reign of the British Queen Victoria. These years were the peak of Britain's political and economic power. At its height, the British Empire stretched around the globe; England was the financial center of the global economy. It was also a socially conservative time, with strict gender roles and hardening limits on sexuality.

Tennyson's poetry reflects the social and political dynamics of his moment. It is itself conservative, looking backward to historical forms and traditions rather than developing new ways of writing. And it is often in allegiance with the power structure in the country. (Tennyson was, for instance, a vocal supporter of the Crimean War—even as "The Charge of the Light Brigade" may raise some implicit questions about the handling of the war). Unlike many of the poets who followed him, Tennyson was interested in preserving and upholding the society in which he lived—rather than searching for ways to criticize it.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" was written in the fall of 1854 and published just six weeks after the event it describes, a disastrous cavalry charge during the Battle of Balaclava in the Crimean War. When an English cavalry division charged a well-fortified Russian artillery position, almost all of the cavalrymen were killed; the Russians suffered few casualties. Though historians disagree about who, exactly, was responsible for this disaster, it seems that there was miscommunication and the brigade received the wrong orders. The event thus triggered a vigorous debate in Britain about the Crimean War itself, and the way that the military leadership was conducting it.

The Crimean War was fought between 1853-56. The Russian Empire faced off against an alliance consisting of the Ottoman Empire, Britain, and the Italian Kingdom of Sardinia. The causes of the war are complex, but at its heart, it was an attempt by Britain and France to keep Russia from gaining power in the Balkans and the Middle East. It was largely fought in the Balkans but quickly became the subject of considerable controversy in England and France—though, eventually, the Russian army sued for peace in 1856. It was one of the first conflicts in which modern military technologies—like exploding artillery shells—were used, resulting in unprecedented carnage.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Victorian England — A history of Victorian England from the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/victorian-britain)

- The Crimean War — A brief history of the Crimean War from Britain's National Archives. (https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/battles/crimea/)

- The Poem Read Aloud — Colm O'Sullivan recites "The Charge of the Light Brigade" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_FJiFn7MK_g)

- Poem of the Week — A brief essay on "The Charge of the Light Brigade" from Carol Rumens at The Guardian. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2014/jan/20/poem-of-the-week-charge-light-brigade-tennyson)

- New Light on the Light Brigade — A recent article from the Telegraph Newspaper on newly uncovered information about the history of the Light Brigade's fateful charge. (https://www.telegraph.co.uk/history/10776275/New-accounts-emerge-of-Charge-of-the-Light-Brigade.html)

- Tennyson's Life Story — A detailed biography of the author of "The Charge of the Light Brigade" from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/alfred-tennyson)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ALFRED LORD TENNYSON POEMS

- Crossing the Bar
- Tears, Idle Tears
- The Brook
- Ulysses

HOW TO CITE

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