

Literature Paper 2 Section B: Anthology Poetry

Learning compendium

'Charge of the Light Brigade' by Tennyson

Key ideas

*The Crimean War was fought between Britain and Imperial Russia from 1853-1856. For the first time in history, newspapers carried eye-witness reports.

*The most significant moment came during the Battle of Balaclava. An order given to the Light Brigade was misunderstood and 600 cavalymen ended charging down a narrow valley straight into the fire of Russian cannons.

*The mission was suicidal. The soldiers had no hope of winning.

*Tennyson read an eye-witness account and was so moved by the account, he produced his poem quickly afterwards. The purpose of his poem was to honour the sacrifice made by the Light Brigade. It was also written to memorialise or remember the devastating effects of the cavalry charge. The event itself is famous because it shows just how terrible war can be when generals make the wrong tactical judgements.

*Tennyson was also Poet Laureate and as such it was his role to write poems about national/ significant events.

STOP-CHECK!

1. Which war and battle is the poem about?
2. Write down 4 facts about the Light Brigade's charge.
3. What inspired Tennyson to write the poem?
4. What is the main purpose of the poem?

Form and structure

Six stanza structure purposefully created to remember the approx. number of soldiers.

Narrative poem in 3rd person.

Stanzas 1 and 2 approaching the valley, a charged and dramatic atmosphere is created through the use of the dactylic dimeter rhythm (DUM-da-da). This could be used to represent the sound of the horses galloping.

Stanzas 3-5 describes the horrendous conditions of war.

The strict stanza structure of stanza one could represent the tight formation of the Light Brigade.

In stanzas 3 and 5 the poet uses anaphora (repetition of 'cannons') to show how trapped the soldiers are.

Stanza 6- is shorter and commanding in its tone. Tennyson, at this point in the poem, uses his influence as Poet Laureate to become an almost omnipotent voice. The style of poem switches from narrative to imperative.

Repetition (epistrophe) of 'the six hundred' at the end of each stanza could either represent the huge loss of soldiers in the charge or as a device to remember the Light Brigade. (Use of definite article 'the' makes it explicitly clear it is referring to one unit of soldiers)

Repetition (anaphora) at the start of lines is used in all stanzas.

Stanza two- repetition of 'theirs' reinforces the soldiers' sense of duty and patriotism as they didn't question the orders given.

STOP-CHECK!

1. Why does the poem have 6 stanzas?
2. How does the poet create a charged and dramatic atmosphere in stanzas 1 and 2?
3. Why does the poet use anaphora in stanzas 3 and 5?
4. What is the tone of stanza 6?
5. Why does Tennyson use the definite article in the phrase 'the six hundred'?

Language

Religious allusion

'valley of Death' is an allusion to a line from the Bible. ('Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.') This would have resonated with the Christian society at the time. It is a reference to hell.

Presentation of the soldiers

'Flash'd' Use of light imagery and verb at the start the line could be viewed as the poet almost objectifying the soldiers as superhuman. They are presented as overcoming their fear and physical human frailties to create a powerful image of heroism. Alternatively the first four lines of stanza four could be seen as Tennyson showing how ill-equipped the soldiers were for this type of battle. It again reinforces their heroism as it shows that the British soldiers only had swords against the Russian's guns and cannons.

Tennyson provides a range of descriptions to show the skill of the soldiers.

'Boldly the rode and well'
'Sabring the gunners there'
'Charging an army'

The use of verbs and/or adverbs at the start of lines reinforces the soldiers' heroism and adds to the charged and dramatic rhythm of the poem creating action and pace.

Presentation of the valley

'jaws of Death' and 'mouth of Hell'. The poet personifies the valley and compares it to a monster which the soldiers can't escape from. This again reinforces the readers' admiration of the soldiers' sacrifice and bravery.

'Volley'd and thunder'd' Use of onomatopoeia to recreate the sound of the cannons. Moreover adds to the dramatic and charged feel of the poem.

'Storm'd at with shot and shell' Sibilance is used to recreate the sound in the valley. It may emphasise the idea of ammunition flying towards them.

STOP-CHECK!

1. Explain the meaning/ allusion behind the phrase 'valley of Death'.
2. Why does Tennyson use light imagery?
3. How does the poet use personification to present the valley?
4. How is sound created in the poem?

Feelings and attitudes

Admiration
Patriotism
Horror of war

Themes

War and reality of conflict
Power of humans

STOP-CHECK!

Create spider diagrams for each 'feeling and attitude' and theme, explaining how each one is represented in the poem. Use the other sections to help you.

Compare with...

'Exposure' (power of nature/ weather)
'Bayonet Charge' (representation of a soldier)
'Remains' (representation of a soldier- modern view)
'Kamikaze' (exploration of 'duty' in war)

STOP-CHECK!

Without looking, write down the poems you could compare with 'Charge of the Light Brigade' and how you could compare them.

Key quotations

'Valley/ jaws of Death'
'Storm'd at with shot and shell'
'Flash'd'

STOP-CHECK!

1. Learn the key quotations.
Challenge: can you learn the other quotations referred to on the compendium?

Glossary

Battery- a group of cannons
Blunder'd - stupid or careless mistake
Boldly - confident; courageous; willing
Brigade - way of dividing up an army; cavalry soldiers, meaning riding on horseback
Cossak- a warrior from southern Russia and Ukraine
League - equal to about 3 miles
Reason why - question; work out

Reel'd – stagger or lurch violently

Sabres– long curved swords

Sabring– to cut or wound with a sabre

Shot and shell – bullets and big explosives fired from cannon

Sunder'd – split apart

Thunder'd – loud; explosive

Volley'd – discharge of a number of missiles or firearms at once

Useful Youtube Videos

The NTS English teachers recommend you watch one of the following videos in order to develop your knowledge further or gain a different perspective.

Mr Bruff video link= <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OXVs8KydoNY> (This video is 33 minutes long. Watch in 2 sections)

OR

Stacey Reay video link= <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=exZiCfpzrCk>