



# The Charge of the Light Brigade KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER

**Context** – *The Charge of the Light Brigade* was written by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, in 1854

**Alfred, Lord Tennyson** – Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) was a poet, whose work remains popular today. Many phrases from his work have become commonplace in English today. He was one of 11 children, and received a good literary education. He began publishing poems whilst still a student at Cambridge. In 1850, he became Poet Laureate, writing poems on matters of national importance until his death in 1892.



**The Crimean War** – The Crimean War was a military conflict fought between 1853 and 1856, in which the Russian Empire lost to an alliance of France, Britain, the Ottoman Empire, and Sardinia. The causes for the war are notoriously blurry, however relate to a reluctance to allow Russia to gain land during the Ottoman decline. Despite these unclear intentions, it has become known for its bloodiness and catastrophic mismanagement.



**Attitudes to War** – Public perceptions of war have significantly altered since Lord Tennyson's era, owing largely to the horrendous impact of WWI, WWII and the Vietnam War. Many at the time felt that war was worthwhile and glorious, and that there was no honour greater than dying for one's country. Whilst Tennyson was predominantly against the idea of war (the poem shows disgust for the treatment of soldiers), he presents that taking orders and dying for one's country is honourable.



**The Battle of Balaklava** – The Battle of Balaklava was fought on 25<sup>th</sup> October 1854 as a part of the Crimean War. During this battle, 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' took place. The cavalry were intended to be sent to prevent Russians from removing captured guns, however a miscommunication resulted in them charging directly at an artillery battery, surrounded, and under withering direct fire. They reached the battery, but high casualties forced them to quickly retreat.



## Language/Structural Devices

**Rhetorical Questions/ Imperative Verbs** – Tennyson makes smart use of rhetorical questions and imperative verbs to both encourage the reader to think deeply about the situation, and to gain exert authority over how the reader should react to the poem. For example, the rhetorical question 'was there a man dismayed?' manipulates the reader into considering that there was a good cause to be upset about the order. Furthermore, the imperative verb 'honour' tells the reader exactly how they should think of the soldiers.

**Alliteration** – A range of alliteration is used throughout the poem to recreate the sounds that the soldiers hear in the battlefield environment. There is a visceral effect, for example, that is created when the reader traverses the line 'stormed at with shot and shell.' The repeated 's' sound replicating the violence of the moment. Alliteration is also utilised to capture the reactions of the world to the event – the repeated 'wo' sound in 'All the world wondered' depicting the astonishment of those reading about the battle.

**Quote:** "Honour the charge they made!  
Honour the Light Brigade."

**Quote:** "Charging an army, while  
All the world wondered."

**Metaphors** – The predominant metaphor used throughout the poem compares the battleground to the 'valley of death', and an extension of this (as the soldiers reach the opposition battery) is the jaws of death. This creates a sense of ominous certainty that the men will perish when they enter. This makes the return of a number of them seem all the more remarkable.

**Varied Verbs** – Tennyson uses some interesting and original verbs to portray the actions, sights, and sounds on the battlefield. For example, the artillery is described using the words 'volleyed', 'thundered', and 'stormed.' Such powerful verbs make the artillery seem like an almighty force of nature (note the connotations of violent weather), something far bigger and stronger than the Light Brigade.

**Quote:** "Into the valley of Death  
Rode the six hundred."

**Quote:** "Volleyed and thundered;  
Stormed at with shot and shell"

**Form/Structure** – The poem is composed of six stanzas which vary in length from six to twelve lines. Each of the stanzas shares similarities, for example ending with the refrain 'six hundred', thus emphasising the most important message in the poem. The poem also makes use of anaphora (the same words repeated at the beginning of lines).

**Rhythm/Rhyme** – The poem is written in dimeter – meaning that there are two stressed syllables per line. These are usually followed by at least two unstressed syllables, creating the sound of Light Brigade riding into battle on horseback. The use of sporadic rhyme further strengthens this rhythm, creating a flow to the poem as it is read aloud.

**Quote:** "Cannon to right of them / Cannon to left of them / Cannon in front of them."

**Quote:** "Flashed all their sabres bare / Flashed as they turned in air / Sab'ring the gunners there."

**Themes** – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

**Remembrance** – Tennyson's predominant aim in the poem is to create a lasting memory of the bravery of the anonymous men in the Light Brigade. Clear respect is shown for the men throughout the entirety of the poem, but the clear attempts to cement their legacy come in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half, through vocabulary such as 'hero' and 'glory.'



**The Futility of War** – Whilst Tennyson's poem conforms to the idea that death for one's country in war is deemed 'honourable', it also shows thinly veiled disgust at the treatment of the men in the Light Brigade. This is most evident in the lines 'though the soldier knew/ Someone had blundered.'



## Line-by-Line Analysis

STANZA	LINE	POEM	ANALYSIS
1	1	Half a league, half a league,	A 'league' is an old way to measure distance, equating to around 3 miles. The <u>repetition</u> of this commences a rolling rhythm that continues through the poem, resembling the sound of horses' <u>hooves galloping</u> . Tennyson uses a <u>metaphor</u> in describing the opposition-dominated battlefield as 'the valley of death.' This has <u>religious connotations</u> (Psalm 23). 'Light' brigade is in opposition to the 'heavy' artillery, and yet they are being asked to 'Charge for the guns!' It is assumed 'he' refers to the commander.
	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.	
2	9	"Forward, the Light Brigade!"	Once more the order is repeated to charge forward. The poet uses a <u>rhetorical question</u> to question the sense of the order – yet affirms that the soldiers carried out the order even though they knew there had been a mistake ( <u>someone had blundered</u> ). The <u>anaphora</u> involving the lines beginning 'theirs' is representative of some form of <u>chant or recitation</u> , thus adopting the voice of the soldiers – it is not their place to answer back or question, just to 'do and die' (follow orders knowing that they will likely die). The last two lines are repeated (a refrain) to emphasise the main action of the poem – the 600 men charging in.
	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.	
3	18	Cannon to right of them,	The <u>anaphora of cannon</u> creates the sense that the cannons are everywhere – the soldiers are hugely outnumbered and facing enemy fire from all angles. The use of <u>varied verbs</u> (volleyed and thundered) creates the reverberating sound of the cannons firing, whilst the <u>alliterative</u> use of the 's' sound in 'stormed at with shot and shell' reflects the viciousness of the attack that they face. The adverb 'boldly' reflects their undeterred demeanour, even though the <u>extension of the metaphor</u> (becoming the 'jaws of death') makes this appear more and more like a suicide mission.
	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.	
	4	27	
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.	
5	39	Cannon to right of them,	In a near repeat of the beginning of stanza 3, the Light Brigade are surrounded by cannons, however the use of the <u>preposition 'behind'</u> shows us that they have now turned around and are riding back. Note the use of <u>rhyme in this stanza</u> , stressing 'shell', 'fell', 'hell' and 'well.' These four words alone emphasise how horrific and dangerous the battle was, yet how the Light Brigade fought strongly and were prepared to die for their country in the face of it. The 'jaws of death' metaphor had suggested certain death, and yet 'what was left of them' rode back out – thus demonstrating their achievement against the odds. The main difference, as the last line expresses, is there are far fewer 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.	
6	50	When can their glory fade?	In the final paragraph, Tennyson aims to drive home his <u>message of their glory</u> , and cement their places as legends. The use of 'O' and an exclamation mark shows the speaker's sheer astonishment at the bravery of the cavalry's charge. The speaker then uses 'honour' as an <u>imperative verb</u> , to command the reader to remember and respect the noble six hundred.
	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!	

## Poems for Comparison

Poem	Comparison	The Poet's Influences
Mametz Wood	<i>Exposure</i> can be compared and contrasted with this poem in relation to the theme of <u>remembrance</u>	<b>FROM THE TIMES, OCTOBER 25<sup>th</sup>, 1854:</b> If the exhibition of the most brilliant valour, of the excess of courage... I shall proceed to describe, to the best of my power, what occurred under my own eyes, and to state the facts which I have heard from men whose veracity is unimpeachable, reserving to myself the right of private judgement in making public and in suppressing the details of what occurred on this memorable day... At 11:00 our Light Cavalry Brigade rushed to the front... The Russians opened on them with guns from the redoubts on the right, with volleys of musketry and rifles. They swept proudly past, glittering in the morning sun in all the pride and splendor of war. We could hardly believe the evidence of our senses. Surely that handful of men were not going to charge an army in position? Alas! It was but too true -- their desperate valour knew no bounds, and far indeed was it removed from its so-called better part -- discretion. They advanced in two lines, quickening the pace as they closed towards the enemy.
Exposure	<i>The Charge of the Light Brigade</i> can be compared and contrasted with this poem in the approach to the <u>futility of war</u> .	