The Charge of the Light Brigade Study Guide

The Charge of the Light Brigade by Alfred Tennyson, 1st Baron Tennyson

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Introduction

Tennyson wrote "The Charge of the Light Brigade" in a few minutes on December 2, 1854, after reading an article in the London *Times* about the Battle of Balaclava in the Crimean War, which was fought from 1853 to 1856 between Russia on one side and England, France, Turkey, and Sardinia on the other. According to his son, Hallam Tennyson, it was the poet's method to catch phrases that attracted his interest, which he "rolled about, so to speak, in his head, before he wrote them down." In this case, the phrase from the newspaper article was "some hideous blunder," which appears in the poem as "someone had blundered": this might indicate that Tennyson was seeking to blame someone for the disastrous massacre that wiped out the Light Brigade, but the "someone" is never mentioned again. This poem is about courage, not about the bad luck or stupidity that put the men of the Light Brigade cavalry in a position to display that courage.

The Charge of the Light Brigade" was first published in the December 9, 1854, issue of the *London Examiner* and was later included in Tennyson's collection *Maud, and Other Poems* in 1855. In 1850, Tennyson was appointed by Queen Victoria to succeed Wordsworth as poet laureate of England. Although Victoria's reign is associated with the Enlightenment, a time when logic and reason were the celebrated ideals, this poem celebrates the native dignity of the uneducated cavalrymen, of whom Tennyson says, "Theirs was not to reason why." Perhaps because it celebrates the common man at a time of social change that generally favored the intellectual, the poem was tremendously popular in its day, although generations that followed have remembered it, usually negatively, as a celebration of war's glory. In Tennyson's time, though, the poem had such all-around popularity that the poet was induced years later to return to the same battle, in a poem examining a much more successful assault by the British troops: "The Charge of the Heavy Brigade at Balaclava," published in 1885's *Tiresias and Other Poems.*

Author Biography

Tennyson was born in 1809 in Somersby, Lincolnshire, England. The fourth of twelve children, he was the son of a clergyman who maintained his office grudgingly after his younger brother had been named heir to their father's wealthy estate. According to biographers, Tennyson's father, a man of violent temper, responded to his virtual disinheritance by indulging in drugs and alcohol. Each of the Tennyson children later suffered through some period of drug addiction or mental and physical illness, prompting the family's grim speculation on the "black blood" of the Tennysons. Biographers surmise that the general melancholy expressed in much of Tennyson's verse is rooted in the unhappy environment at Somersby.

Tennyson enrolled at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1827. There he met Arthur Hallam, a brilliant undergraduate who became Tennyson's closest friend and ardent admirer of his poetry. Hallam's enthusiasm was welcomed by Tennyson, whose personal circumstances had led to a growing despondency: his father died in 1831, leaving Tennyson's family in debt and forcing his early departure from school; one of Tennyson's brothers suffered a mental breakdown and required institutionalization; and Tennyson himself was morbidly fearful of falling victim to epilepsy or madness. Hallam's untimely death in 1833, which prompted the series of elegies later comprising *In Memoriam,* contributed greatly to Tennyson's despair. In describing this period, he wrote: "I suffered what seemed to me to shatter all my life so that I desired to die rather than to live." For nearly a decade after Hallam's death Tennyson published no poetry. During this time he became engaged to Emily Sellwood, but financial difficulties and Tennyson's persistent anxiety over the condition of his health resulted in their separation. In 1842 an unsuccessful financial venture cost Tennyson nearly everything he owned, causing him to succumb to a deep depression that required medical treatment. Tennyson later resumed his courtship of Sellwood, and they were married in 1850. The timely success of *In Memoriam,* published that same year, ensured Tennyson's appointment as Poet Laureate, succeeding William Wordsworth. In 1883 Tennyson accepted a peerage, the first poet to be so honored strictly on the basis of literary achievement. Tennyson died in 1892 and was interred in Poet's Corner of Westminister Abbey.

Poem Text

1
Half a league, half a league, half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.
"Forward the Light Brigade! .
Charge for the guns!" he said.
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.
2
"Forward, the Light Brigade!"
Was there a man dismayed?
Not though the soldier knew
Someone had blundered.
Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die.
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.
3
Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
Volleyed and thundered;
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.
4
Flashed all their sabers bare,
Flashed as they turned in air
Sab'ring the gunners there,
Charging an army, while
All the world wondered.
Plunged in the battery smoke
Right through the line they broke
Cossack and Russian
Reeled from the saber stroke
Shattered and sundered.
Then they rode back, but not,
Not the six hundred.
5
Cannon to right of them,

Cannon to left of them,
Cannon behind them
Volleyed and thundered;
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.
6 When can their glory fade?
0 the wild charge they made!
All the world wondered.
Honor the charge they made!
Honor the Light Brigade,
Noble six hundred!

Plot Summary

Lines 1-4:

The beginning lines of the poem throw the reader into the center of action, with a rousing chant that drives the reader, both in its description and in its galloping rhythm, toward the battle. A "league" is approximately three miles long: charging horses could cover half a league in a few minutes. The audiences of the time of the poem would have been familiar with the Battle of Balaclava in the Crimean War, upon which the poem is based, and would have known from the beginning that they were charging to their own doom. (As the poem soon makes clear, the six hundred cavalrymen of the Light Brigade were aware of this themselves.) The poem suggests that it is these moments before the battle has begun that are the Brigade's greatest glory. The phrase "Valley of Death" refers to an episode of John Bunyon's *Pilgrim's Progress* and to Psalm 23 from the New Testament of the Bible: in both of these sources, faith makes people brave when they are faced with death.

Lines 5-8:

In the earliest published version of this poem, printed in the London *Examiner* on December 9, 1854, the command to charge forward was attributed to Lord Nolan, a well-known military figure of the time. In changing the speaker to an anonymous "he," the poet shifts the focus of the poem away from individual actions and decisions onto matters of record, and onto the roles played by followers and leaders in military situations everywhere. In addition to obscuring the identity of the speaker, this final version of the poem changes the command given from "Take the guns" to "Charge for the guns!" This heightens the sense of the danger of the charge, while leaving unstated the reason for charging into the blaring gunfire.

Lines 9-12:

No sooner does line 9 repeat the shouted command that sends the Light Brigade to their doom than line 10 makes the reader wonder whether any of the soldiers were stricken with fear upon hearing the command. Although we currently closely associate the word "dismay" with "shock," its actual meaning includes a loss of courage. By raising this issue as a question and then answering that no, there was no fear, Tennyson gives the reader a moment's pause to let the full extent of the soldiers' bravery sink in. Line 11 and line 12 tell the reader without question that every member of the Brigade knew that this order was a mistake. This contradiction-the fact that the soldiers knew they were likely to die because of a "blunder" in military strategy, yet charged forward without fear anyway-gives the poem a psychological depth that would be lost if it merely celebrated the loyalty of soldiers who were unaware of the faulty command they were following.

Lines 13-17:

Lines 13 through 15 repeat each other, in the way they phrase the rules these soldiers live by. The style suggests the regimented, militaristic way the members of the Light Brigade think as they ride ahead, and the effect of the strong use of repetition is to drown out concerns about the blunder mentioned in the previous stanza. "Theirs but to do and die" says that the soldiers are actually *supposed* to die-this might seem contrary to the purpose of fighting, but Tennyson makes it clear that this is the belief of the charging soldiers, for whom such a fate would be the ultimate expression of loyalty. In lines 16 and 17, the perspective shifts from what the soldiers think of their mission to a view of the overall battle situation, again repeating the image of the "valley of Death."

Lines 18-21:

The first three lines of this stanza are virtually identical, changing only the location of the cannons, presenting the layout of the battlefield visually, instead of simply stating the fact that there were cannons all around. By repeating the phrase three times, the reader is not only given information about the tremendous odds against the Light Brigade, but the poem gives the feeling of being surrounded.

Lines 22-26:

"Stormed" in line 22 extends the image of "thundered" from the line before it, making the barrage of cannon fire aimed at the cavalrymen appear almost like a force of nature. Line 23 makes a point of mentioning that the soldiers of the Light Brigade were brave, but also that they rode their horses well. Their skill is mentioned almost as an afterthought, though, and this is the only place in the poem that it is brought up. The reason for this is that this poem makes its reader analyze the battle almost entirely in terms of attitude, not ability. In lines 24-26, Tennyson expands the phrase that was used to end the first two stanzas: instead of the geographic "Valley of Death," he uses the metaphor "jaws of Death" and extends this metaphor with "mouth of hell." Treating death as the same thing as hell, and making both as real as an animal's attack, the poem heightens the viciousness of death on the battlefield.

Lines 27-38:

This stanza celebrates the Light Brigade's control over the battle at its beginning. They ride into the enemy, using their sabres against opponents armed with cannons and pistols, and are able to break through the front line of defense. The pistols and rifles of the day would have been useless to the members of the Light Brigade because they required reloading with a very complicated procedure that involved measuring gunpowder and pellets, which would have been impossible for a man on horseback. Sending a cavalry unit into the confined space of a valley against guns was so obviously hopeless, that it may be this, and not the brigade's initial success, that is referred to

when the line "all the world wondered" appears in the middle of a vivid battle scene. In this stanza, the Light Brigade takes such complete control of the situation that their opponents, the Cossacks and Russians, find their defensive line tom apart ("shattered and sundered") and have to retreat, while the six hundred cavalry members, who have by this time stared into the barrels of cannons and guns, continue to press forward bravely.

Lines 39-49:

The first five lines of this stanza override any optimism the reader may have gotten from the Light Brigade's initial success. By using the same words as were used in stanza 3 (except that now the cannon are behind instead of in front of them), the poem takes the reader back to the same sense of hopelessness that was established before the battle began. The brief victory that was gained in the fourth stanza has made no difference in the overall scope of the battle. The first time these words were used (lines 18-22), though, they ended with a claim of the soldiers' boldness and skill: this time, they end with the soldiers (referred to directly as "heroes") being shot down. The path that the Light Brigade charged into-the jaws of death, the mouth of hell-is mentioned again as the survivors make their escape. Anthropologists and sociologists have observed that going into hell and then returning is a common motif in the mythology of many of the world's cultures, including one of the best-known myths of Western civilization, the labors of Hercules. The survivors of this battle are thus raised to heroic status by the words that this poem uses to describe the valley's entrance.

Lines 50-55:

The focus of the poem shifts in this stanza, from describing the battle scene to addressing the reader directly. In using the description "wild" to marvel at the charge, Line 51 implies that thoughtless bravery is to be admired in and of itself, regardless of concerns about strategy or success. Repeating the line "All the world wondered" in line 52 adds to the idea that what the soldiers have done goes beyond the average person's comprehension: the soldiers are following rules that those who rely on intellect over loyalty might not understand. Although a close reading of the tone of this poem can leave little question about how we are meant to feel about these cavalrymen, the poem does not rely upon a reader's understanding of the subtleties of tone, but directly tells the reader in line 53 and line 55 to honor these soldiers. That the poem is so straightforward about its intent is an indicator that it was written for a common, often uneducated, audience, to celebrate the actions of common soldiers who understood what they were being asked to do better than the blundering military strategists who planned the attack.

Themes

Loyalty

The soldiers of the Light Brigade are not portrayed in this poem as having any illusions that their attack made sense: in the second stanza we see that they were aware of the fact that their charge was not the result of sound strategy, but of a blunder. But what is a soldier to do when commands do not seem correct? For officers, military training is about developing strategies, but the soldier is trained to follow the strategies that are given to him. Often, the actions that soldiers are required to perform will not seem to them to serve any useful function: soldiers do not have full intelligence about what is going on at other places at the same time, and they are not informed about what the army's overall intention is, or where one order might fit into the overall plan. Sometimes soldiers will be called upon to risk certain death, and they need to have faith that their action will be good for the overall cause in ways they cannot see. The ability to obey such commands blindly is the essence of military training. In this poem, though, that faith is lacking-the cavalrymen can see clearly that there is no hidden benefit to their charge. Tennyson does not say that they suspected a blunder, or felt sure of one, but only that they knew. With no benefit to the charge and certain death the price, it would make sense for the soldiers to disobey their command.

But Tennyson presents the obedient soldiers as heroes. To a society that values independent thought, where reason is the ultimate guide, the heroism of these men can be hard to follow. There is no doubt that they are courageous, charging right into the face of danger, but absurd courage, on the level of stepping in front of an oncoming train, does not merit the sort of praise Tennyson showers on the Light Brigade. Military society, though, is not like the average society; it does not value reason and independence above all else. It values loyalty. For Tennyson to say that there is no reason for these soldiers to be loyal to their blundering commanders was actually a way of recognizing the nature of their heroism. They are loyal in spite of the presence or absence of reason. Their loyalty is pure and untainted by any other ideas.

Pride

When writing for a civilian audience about a great military victory, it is easy to make readers proud of their armed forces. In writing this poem, however, Tennyson stirs up those same feelings for an unmitigated, undisputed failure. One benefit he had in stirring the pride of a British audience of 1854 was the effect of nationalism, the tendency to blindly support one's own country, right or wrong. During a time of war, nationalism can grow almost without limit. The British citizens eagerly supported the Crimean War, on which this poem is based, and Tennyson could play on their pride for the troops with a statement like "Boldly they rode, and well." The fact that audiences at the time would have known of the futility of the Light Brigade's charge might have made them even more eager for the poem's gallant tone. This poem has been read for over a

hundred years by civilizations across the globe, all of whom respond to the glory of the Light Brigade, and the work stirs up feelings of pride in generation after generation.

Much of the emotional response felt by readers who have had no stake in the Crimean War is because of the way Tennyson manipulates language. Victorian readers knew before the poem was written that the Light Brigade had been doomed: Tennyson reveals as much to everyone else in the second stanza. But this is just a case of a master magician revealing a trick he intends to perform and then deftly pulling it over on people anyway. No one who knows these soldiers were doomed could guess just how doomed the author was to portray them in this poem. Tennyson combines powerful actions with powerful imagery; he uses the words "vollied," "thundered," "plunged," "reeled," and "stormed." Little is made of the actual soldiers they faced, but the poet repeats the phrase "valley of Death" twice in the first stanza alone, followed later with the "jaws of Death" and the "mouth of Hell." He emphasizes the presence of cannons. There is a human tendency to identify with the underdog in conflicts-at least to the degree that the struggle of the underdog makes a conflict interesting-and Tennyson changes the reader's interest to pride by emphasizing the impossibility of their situation. Throughout the poem, the reader is moved to hope that this unavoidable defeat will somehow turn out to be worthwhile. In the final stanza, having fired up the reader's emotions, the speaker of the poem addresses the reader directly: "Honor the charge they made!"

Style

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" is divided into six stanzas that vary from six to twelve lines each. While the poem cannot be easily classified as far as its meter, or rhythm structure, the dominant rhythm in 'The Charge of the Light Brigade" is dactylic. A dactyl is a metric unit (also called a "foot") consisting of one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed. When Tennyson uses two dactyls to a line, the effect is that the poem thunders boldly like war drums or like hoofbeats, as in the following line:

Half a league, / half a league

The initial dactyl in each line is often combined with a trochee, which is a foot consisting of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable. It is used with a dactyl to bring a series of lines to a clipped halt, as in the lines:

Rode the six / hundred or Someone had / blundered.

The rhythmic pattern of this poem is rousing, but it is not strictly adhered to: in the third stanza, for example, Tennyson slips an extra unstressed syllable into the first dactyl of "Cannons to the right of them," while several other times he adds an extra stressed syllable to the end of a line, as in "All in the valley of Death."

The rhyme scheme is uneven, sometimes strongly linking three lines in a row, skipping a line *or* two, then returning to the rhyme. Sometimes the rhymes are not perfect, such as the connection made between "hundred" and "blundered."

Historical Context

Throughout the 1700s and 1800s and starting with Peter the Great, Russia reached southward to annex countries in the Middle East, most notably Iran and Turkey. Three wars between the years 1804 and 1827 alone were fought between Russia and Iran, resulting in the addition of Georgia and Azerbaijan to the Russian empire. Attempts to take Turkey, under the guise of protecting it, were halted because the Turks, with British and French help, were able to defend their country. Turkey lies on the south shore of the Black Sea. Just over 100 miles north, across the water, is the Crimean Peninsula, a natural launching point for Russian ships to invade Turkey, if only Russia could maintain control of it. From October of 1853 to February of 1856, British, French, and Turkish troops fought the Crimean War for dominance of the peninsula. France and Britain wanted to keep Russia from progressing to their eastern and middle-eastern colonies, most notably Egypt and India, and consequently they sent more soldiers to Crimea than Turkey did. Losses were heavy, especially for the British, who were poorly equipped in both supplies and manpower. On October 25, 1854, the Battle of Balac1ava provided the British with an especially humiliating defeat. The infantrymen of the Light Brigade charged against overwhelming odds, for no good strategic purpose, and were almost completely gunned down. *They* charged because their orders were passed from one officer to another and somewhere were misinter preted. There had been "some hideous blunder," according to the report by William Howard Russell, *The Times'* Crimean War correspondent. When he read this report, Tennyson focused on that one phrase and built "The Charge of the Light Brigade" around it, thereby turning a national disgrace into an inspiring act of courage.

The military forces of Great Britain were unprepared to go off to war in 1853, but the population was eager for just that type of distraction. It had been almost forty years since Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, and after that victory the country had prospered in a cautious, conservative way under the reign of Queen Victoria. The Victorian Era is remembered in an oversimplified way as being a time of tame politeness bordering upon hypocrisy, of social image being fussed over at the expense of honesty. As negotiations between Russia and Turkey broke down in 1853 and war became more likely, Britains jumped at the chance. For the lower social classes it was a way of proving the country's strength, while some members of the upper class treated the invasion of Crimea as a game or diversion. Some noblemen, including Lord Cardigan, who eventually gave the disastrous order for the Light Brigade to charge, sailed off to the Black Sea on their yachts, bringing their wives and maids. Civilians canceled vacation plans so they could follow the army instead. They all assumed that Britain would win, but that assumption was based upon the might and experience of the army of 1815.

Diseases, especially cholera and dysentery, disabled thousands of fighting men; hunger, caused by food shortages, weakened the rest; and the commander of the army, Fitzroy James Henry Somerset-Lord Raglan-had been a secretary at Waterloo, but had no experience in leading combat. (Old and confused, Raglan repeatedly referred to the Russians as "the French," who were actually Britain's allies this time).

In September of 1954, the war effort was on controlling the key Crimean city of Sevastopol, which the Russians occupied. To reach it, the British and their allies had to take the Alma high ground, which they actually did twice-the first time they did it, retreat was called just before their victory. When they had control of Alma, the next logical step would have been to march on to Sevastopol, which the retreating Russians had left unprotected: this was such an obvious next step that for a time it was believed back in London that the soldiers actually had taken the city. The military command, however, decided that in the future they would need a port to ship in supplies, and so they turned away from Sevastopol to a tiny harbor town of Balaclava. On October 25th, the Russian forces established themselves in the hills around Balaclava and tried to take it back. At first, they defeated a Turkish contingent, but they were unable to pierce two lines of defense, Campbell's Highlander's and the Heavy Infantry Brigade. (Ten nyson was to publish a follow-up poem, "The Charge of the Heavy Brigade," twenty years later.) The strategic idea was for the Light Brigade to chase the retreating Russians and make it difficult for them to carry away any of their own or the Turks' armaments. By the time the order reached the front line, though, it was understood to mean that the Light Brigade should charge at the army that was entrenched with cannons in the hills-a hopeless, senseless maneuver.

Sevastopol finally fell on September 11, 1855, and on February 1, 1856, Russia signed a peace accord that ended the fighting. Lord Cardigan, who had ordered the Light Brigade's charge against all common and military sense, came home to a hero's welcome.

Critical Overview

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" is generally considered to be an only moderately successful work, at least from a critical standpoint, although it is one of the most well-known poems in the English language. In fact, the work proved so popular that it was adapted into a Hollywood movie in the 1930s. In an 1895 essay from his *Corrected Impressions: Essays on Victorian Writers,* critic George Saintsbury notes that "at no time was Tennyson a perfect master of the quick and lively measures" or meters, and adds that "his difficulty in this respect has not improved 'The Charge of the Light Brigade.'" The theme of the poem has also come under criticism; following World War I, after the world had experienced the horror and destruction of war on a previously unheard of scale, critics abandoned this poem due to its glorification of heroic, senseless death.

Herbert Foltinek, however, in a 1985 essay from *A Yearbook of Studies in English Language and Literature,* asserts that the poem "cannot be all that easily dismissed as a collection of sabre-rattling sentiments." The critic explains that there are a number of reasons why the poet may have written this poem in praise of a battle that ended in senseless defeat. "As poet laureate, he might... have felt called upon to compose a tribute to the Queen's troops who had fought so bravely for a good cause." Foltinek also mentions a tendency that the British have to "glory in defeat." Another possibility that he considers is that Tennyson may have started the poem to protest the "blunder" he had read about in the paper, which led to the Light Brigade's defeat, but in writing it found himself swept up in his own noble tone. Because the poem fails to fully address the responsibility for a "blunder" which led to hundreds of senseless deaths, Foltinek declares, "The Charge of the Light Brigade" "falls short of illustrating the human condition of our time."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Arnold Markley is a freelance writer who has contributed essays and reviews to Approaches to Teaching D. H. Lawrence's Fiction *and* The Journal of the History of Sexuality. *He is currently an Assistant Professor in English at Penn State University, Media, PA. In the following essay, Markley surveys the historical events that inspired "The Charge of the Light Brigade, " reviews its publication and initial reception, and discusses Tennyson's effective use of sound and imagery in the poem.*

One of Alfred, Lord Tennyson's best known poems, and indeed one of the most famous war poems of all times, "The Charge of the Light Brigade," immortalizes an important military incident in British history. In the mid-1850s, England became involved in the Crimean War, a struggle with Russia over control of the Crimean peninsula, a peninsula in the southwest Ukraine that extends into the Black Sea. On October 25, 1854, the famous charge occurred during a battle in which the Russians unsuccessfully attempted to take control of the port at Balaclava-an important supply port for the British, French, and Turkish forces who were fighting in league against Russia. British brigades managed to fend off two Russian cavalry advances on Balaclava, but the Russians were able to occupy the Fedyukhin and Vorontsov heights surrounding a valley near Balaclava. From a point high above Sebastopol, British leader Lord Raglan observed the Russians removing artillery from captured posts on the Vorontsov heights and sent an order to Lord Lucan that the Light Brigade was to attempt to stop the Russians on the Vorontsov heights and to recapture some of the stolen guns. Lord Lucan quarreled with messenger Captain Nolan, however, and as a result, the direction of the charge that Raglan had commanded was confused. Captain Nolan was killed before he could clear up the confusion and prevent Lord Cardigan from leading the Light Brigade into the valley toward the Russian cavalry, instead of up the heights in defense of the posts there. As a result of this critical mistake, an estimated 247 of 637 men were killed or wounded, or nearly 40 percent of the Light Brigade.

In November Tennyson read of the disastrous charge in the newspaper; he composed the poem on December 2, 1854. Tennyson determined the metrical plan of the poem from the line "Some one had blundered," which was inspired by an editorial he had read that referred to the incident as "some hideous blunder." First published in the *Examiner* on December 9, 1854, the poem underwent heavy alterations in subsequent printings, including, in some versions, the poet's removal of the line "Some one had blundered," at the advice of friends. Evidently, Tennyson later regretted this alteration and reinstated the line, feeling perhaps that the real cause of the disaster should be admitted and stated explicitly; the charge was, after all, someone's blunder. The many alterations to "The Charge of the Light Brigade" over the years suggest that Tennyson never seemed to be completely pleased with the poem, and indeed he never came to consider it among his finest works.

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" was an inspiration for British soldiers fighting in the Crimean War, however, and in August of 1855, Tennyson had 1,000 copies printed for them. In the soldiers' version of the poem, Tennyson took care to reinsert the line,

"Some one had blundered." The aspect of the poem that the Victorians found most moving was its glorification of the noble soldiers who followed the orders that they were given, despite the fact that they knew full well that charging toward the Russian cavalry in the valley would be a disastrous and likely fatal move. The poem captures this noble sense of duty to one's superiors and honor in battle: "Their's not to make reply, / Their's not to reason why, / "Their's but to do and die!"

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" was popular among the Victorians and has remained a popular war poem. Nevertheless, like the poet himself, critics have never considered the poem to be one of Tennyson's greatest works. The main criticism of the poem from an artistic point of view has tended to involve its heavy- almost forced-meter and rhythm and its frequent use of repetition, which critics view as detractions from the overall success of the poem. Nevertheless the poet should be credited with his effective use of sound and imagery in the poem. In 1890, just two years before Tennyson's death, Thomas Edison sent a representative to England with his new recording device to capture the poet's voice as he read his own work. The manner in which Tennyson reads "The Charge of the Light Brigade" is a wonderful reminder of the richness of the sounds in this poem. As Tennyson reads them, the opening lines, "Half a league, half a league, / Half a league onward," sound like the galloping of the cavalry horses in the charge, and Tennyson's explosive pronunciation of the first syllable of the word "cannon" in the three lines at the beginning of stanza 3 echoes the explosion of cannon fire that surrounded the soldiers.

In addition to the realistic battle sounds re-created in "The Charge of the Light Brigade," the poem's imagery captures the visual aspects of the battle, particularly in stanza 4 with the flashing of the soldiers' sabres and their plunging into the smoke from all the exploding artillery. Here the Russians are described as turning back from the fierce onslaught of the Light Brigade, but "Not the six hundred." Their return from the battle is postponed until stanza 5, after the Russians had fled; only then do Tennyson's noble but tattered remnants of the British Light Brigade stumble back out of the "jaws of Death" and the "mouth of Hell." Stanza 6 provides a final tribute to these brave heroes as the poet asks, "When can their glory fade?" and calls upon the reader to "Honour the charge they made!" Whether or not the critic finds the heavy metrical pattern or the frequent repetition in this poem to be worthy of a great work of art, most readers would agree that Tennyson's use of these poetic elements, and his mastery of word, sound, and image, make "The Charge of the Light Brigade" a moving and beautiful tribute to a disastrous historic event.

Source: Arnold Markley, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

McGann recounts the tragedy at Balaclava in the following article. He discusses Tennyson's reaction to the event and his motives for writing "The Charge of the Light Brigade".

The Crimean War, the famous charge at Balaclava, and Tennyson's own attitudes toward these matters are universally recognized by the critics, but only because they are universally regarded as embarrassments, both in themselves and to the poem. My own view, however, is that such a critical stance has misunderstood the relation which exists between poems and their historical formats, and that the significance of 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', its achievement as a poem, can only appear now through a critical elucidation of the work's historical aspects.

The topical character of the poem is established by its first printing, which was in *The Examiner* (9 Dec. 1854) one week after Tennyson read of the events at Balaclava and wrote the poem. But the poem is not so much a commentary on the war and British foreign policy in the Crimea as it is a eulogy of the British character. As such, its specific location in time and place focuses the poem's choice of a certain ideological point of view, and that point of view in turn focuses the historical and human drama which the poem embodies and represents. Let us begin to elucidate that drama, to clear away the vaguenesses which have gathered about the poem and permit it to recover its aesthetic resources.

As we have seen, the poem was from the outset a 'popular' work-it took its origin in a newspaper report, and it first appeared in the popular press. Indeed, the poem in many respects is a distilled interpretation of the popular reaction to the charge as that reaction was expressed in the newspapers. *The Times* leader of 13 November 1854 carried the first reasonably complete report of the event, and it began as follows.

We now know the details of the attack on Balaclava ... We have... in the despatches before us nearly the whole of the loss, which it would be vain to conceal is most lamentable, and all the more so because it seems to have arisen from some misunderstanding... The disaster... is not more, but it is not much less, than the annihilation of the Light Cavalry Brigade.... Even accident would have made it more tolerable. But it was a mere mistake-evidently a mistake, and perceived to be such.

The note of puzzlement in this passage will be picked up and repeated throughout the many press rehearsals of the events at Balaclava. The question put in *The Times* leader on the next day, 14 November, brings into clear focus the central concern expressed in the public reaction: 'What is the meaning of a spectacle so strange, so terrific, so disastrous, and yet so grand?' The press reports themselves were to work out their explanations, and these had a profound influence on Tennyson's poem, as we shall see. But the press influence reached Tennyson, first, in the request for an explanation, the demand for a meaning. 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' is in great measure a response to the question set out in *The Times.*

We may begin to elucidate Tennyson's answer by looking at the newspaper text of the poem, which was its first printing. *The Examiner* prints a version of lines 5-6 which contain an interesting variation on the received reading. The latter has:

'Forward, the Light Brigade! Charge for the guns! he said.

In the first printing, however, these lines read:

Forward, the Light Brigade!
Take the guns,' Nolan said.

The Examiner's reference to Capt. Lewis Nolan is a concrete detail which would have focused contemporary audience response to the poem in a particular way. Nolan was not just another cavalry officer, but a highly respected and even celebrated figure, and a recognized authority on the management and tactics of cavalry units. In 1853 he published two books which created a sensation in military *circles-Cavalry, Its History And Tactics* and *Nolan's System for Training Cavalry Horses.* That he took part in the charge of the Light Brigade, indeed, that he was killed in that charge, was of course common knowledge by the time of Tennyson's poem. Indeed, the detail is only there in the text because Nolan's career and his death *were* common knowledge.

In the reports which reached England immediately after the charge, Capt. Nolan's name was linked with the infamous 'blunder' which sent the brigade to its fate. Controversy boiled around the degree of his responsibility for the disaster, and he characteristically was made the focus of all the explanations. This happened because Nolan epitomized in the public mind 'a cavalry enthusiast, who had but lately published his opinion that cavalry could do everything in war', as *The Times* leader put it. Part of the explanation for the charge at Balaclava, then, lay in the rash enthusiasms of what *The Times* called 'a proud Dragoon officer'.

When Thoreau commented on the events at Balac1ava from his alien American vantage, he took them to demonstrate 'what a perfect machine the soldier is', and in particular what a thoughtless and rather brutish character was the typical British recruit. But Thoreau's view of the poem and its recorded events is based upon a gross misreading not only of the objective facts of the situation, but of the British response to those events. Once again we have to exercise our historical imaginations if we are to see the human drama of this poem as in itself it really is. As we do this, we must at all times remember that the narrative I am reconstituting here is one that was common knowledge at the time.

Tennyson, like so many others in England, first read a full account of the charge in *The Times* leader of 13 November, and his poem in fact follows this narrative in a number of details, and even uses some of its exact phrasing. The famous lines 'What though the soldier knew / Some one had blundered' rework a passage in the newspaper report which says that the cavalry officers 'knew well what they were about' when they made their charge, were fully aware that 'some hideous blunder' had occurred. Indeed, this is the passage which also supplied Tennyson with the phrase 'the valley of Death'. 'With

nothing to lose but themselves, and no inducements out of their profession', the Light Brigade

risked on that day all the enjoyments that rank, wealth, good social position, and many fortunate cir cumstances can offer... Splendid as the event was on the Alma, yet that rugged ascent... was scarcely so glorious as the progress of the cavalry through and through that valley of death, with a murderous fire, not only in front, but on both sides, above, and even in the rear.

The last part of this passage clearly anticipates some of the most well-known lines in Tennyson's poem. Furthermore, the newspaper account draws attention to a crucial aspect of the poem which will not be found in it *literatim,* but which is none the less present and important: the social standing of the cavalry officers, and the image which the public at the time had of the light cavalry, and especially of the particular units which had been sent to the Crimea. The newspaper's reference to the battle of the Alma, only recently fought, highlights these matters in a way that would have been unmistakable to any contemporary of Tennyson's, but which is necessarily obscure to us now. We must clarify that obscurity.

The charge of the Light Brigade was carried out in three lines. The first was made up of the 13th Light Dragoons and the 17th Lancers; the second of the 11th Hussars; and the third of the 4th Light Dragoons and the principal body of 8th Hussars. This body of light cavalry was in all respects like the rest of the regiments sent to the Crimea; that is to say, they were all the most socially elite units in the British army, spit-and-polish, dashing, and notoriously affected groups which had never seen a battlefield. The units had not been in action since Waterloo, and when they were chosen for the Crimean campaign over the experienced field-tested troops from the Indian frontier, the decision caught the public notice and generated some controversy. Questions were raised whether these 'wasp-waisted, dandified army officers, whom the comic magazines loved to caricature, [would] prove to have any of the mettle of the Peninsular or Waterloo' combatants. This question is implicit in the conclusion of *Maud* when the hero of Tennyson's poem declares: 'Let it flame or fade, and the war roll down like a wind, / We have proved we have hearts in a cause, we are noble still'. 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' is Tennyson's attempt to show not merely that the English aristocracy has not lost Its leadership qualities, but in what respect this historically threatened class still exercises its leadership.

This aspect of Tennyson's meaning emerges when we recall that the battle of the Alma was regarded by the English as a noble victory of the English infantry forces; and furthermore, that traditionally, and in the English mind as well, the infantry and the cavalry were distinguished along class lines; and finally, that the cavalry sent to the Crimea was a special object of public concern, and even at times contempt. The charge of the Light Brigade took place in the context of these facts and attitudes, and the popular explanation of the charge which finally emerged (in its first complete form in *The Times* leader on 14 November) took account of them-as Thoreau's remarks did (and perhaps could) not do. The cavalry in our service is supposed to have always claimed a species of rank over the infantry. Its frequent attendance on the person of

Royalty, its splendid uniforms, and the exemption from colonial service, have made it the favourite resort of the aristocracy, and infected it with the weakness of caste. This has long been so notorious as to be the subject of caricature, which would not have been understood had it not appealed to popular estimate. With these feelings on the two sides, it is no wonder if the cavalry have acted during this campaign with a dignity that rather interfered with their use, and if, on the other hand, the infantry thought the cavalry were saving themselves somewhat too carefully. We believe that this feeling arose much more from the want of a good understanding and a sort of jealousy between the services than from any particular facts; yet, so it is, that from one reason or another the cavalry did little at the Alma, where it was much wanted, and had no other opportunity of distinction during the campaign. We may presume that feelings of this sort would be rather aggravated by the hardships and dangers of the siege, in which, of course, the cavalry could do but little, and by the general want of occasion for its service. Such suspicions and insinuations, unfounded as we believe them to have been, would not be long in finding their way; nor is it likely that such sensitive, high-spirited men, as Lords CARDIGAN and LUCAN would be wholly proof against them. Nothing is more natural than that every feat of daring done by any other branch of the service would be felt as a new summons to do something worthy of the rank assumed by the cavalry. Let us suppose the Light Brigade in view of the enemy on the 25th with such feelings, and spectators of the victorious charge of the Heavy Brigade. Let us further imagine them receiving a written order, in terms that seemed to leave no discretion, to advance and recapture the guns in the hands of the enemy. Let the order be borne, interpreted, and enforced by a cavalry enthusiast, who had but lately published his opinion that cavalry could do everything in war, storm any battery, break any square, whether supported or not. Let the order be passed from officer to officer, each one more jealous of the other, and adding, possibly, personal feelings to a wounded *esprit de corps.* There you have in the proud Dragoon officer, in the stimulating example, in the grand occasion, the crowd of spectators, the absolute order, the enthusiastic messenger, and peremptory interpreter, too ample explanation of a noble but disastrous deed-a fatal display of courage which all must admire while they lament.

Tennyson's poem grounds itself in the feelings and attitudes which this passage has adopted. The six-hundred dead cavaliers are 'noble' still, not merely by virtue of their actual class position, but by reason of their deeds, and the spiritual 'nobility' which their deaths have shown. They have not merely equalled, at Balaclava, the victory achieved at Alma by 'the lower orders', they have surpassed them altogether, and regained their rightful place in society: not its political leaders, but its spiritual models.

Tennyson's poem sets out to make the same kind of statement. This is partly why it does not always attract a later middle-class audience, which may find it difficult to generate a sympathetic attitude toward a patently aristocratic poem. Originally the work was able to cross class lines because the event itself exerted a national impact, because in the context of a foreign war class differences and conflicts tended to dissolve in national sympathies. In such a context it would be well for all the social orders if the 'superior orders' were not in fact effete and socially ineffectual.

One of the principal technical means which secured this meaning for Tennyson-which in fact enabled his poem to cross class lines and speak to the nation at large-is hidden in the iconography of the poem. The images in 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' are drawn from the newspaper accounts of the day, but the form of those images is based upon an iconography of heroism which Tennyson appropriated. His sources are French, bourgeois, and painterly, and his use of them in his English, aristocratic, and verbal work represents another struggle with foreigners which the entire English nation could sympathize with. In this struggle Tennyson means to settle an old score with the French, and to complete, as it were, Wellington's victory at Waterloo: to complete it at the level of ideology.

The key fact about the charge, for Tennyson, is that it took place despite the fact that the cavalry officers understood a blunder had been made somewhere, that the charge was, from the point of view of military tactics, a terrible mistake. The inexorable rhythm of Tennyson's poem:

Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,

perfectly mirrors the cavalry's implacable movement, and both of these correspondent motions reveal the human elements in the situation that Tennyson wishes to emphasize: the men's steadiness of purpose, as well as their entire understanding of what is involved in their action. 'They went with their eyes open', *The Times* reported, 'as if under a spell'.

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
Volleyed and thundered;
Stormed at with shot and shell,
Boldly they rode and well.

The reports which came back to England from the battlefield repeatedly emphasized the orderliness of the charge, its steadiness and fearfully determined resolution: 'in perfect order', said *The Times,* 'to certain destruction'. The English cavalry was generally acknowledged to be manned by the best horsemen in Europe, though it was also widely recognized as a cavalry which had not achieved the successes commensurate with its equestrian talent. Balaclava came to seem what *The Times* called the 'glorious doom' of the Light Brigade, their mission and their fate.

They went as fanatics seek the death that is to save them, and as heroes have sought death in the thick of Ihe fight, when they could no longer hope to conquer ... There was organization and discipline; there was even experience and military skill, at least enough to enable the chiefs to know the terrible nature of the deed... this was not war, as the French General said; it was a spectacle, and one worthy of the 'cloud of witnesses' that encompassed the performers. *(The Times,* 14 Nov.)

All these attitudes were to be gathered up into Tennyson's poem, where the Light Brigade's suicide mission becomes, paradoxically, its crowning glory .

When can their glory fade? 0 the wild charge they made! All the world wondered.

These lines refer specifically to the newspapers' widespread reports of the astonishment which the charge produced in those who observed it-in particular, in the allied French soldiers. The words of the *Morning Chronicle* typify the accounts in all the newspapers. 'French officers, who saw with dismay the madness of the act and the certainty of destruction, express themselves amazed by the invincible spirit of our men.' The remark of the French general Bosquet was reported everywhere and perfectly captures Tennyson's own understanding of the event: ' *C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre.* '

But Tennyson's poem gives an altogether new meaning to Bosquet's famous remark. Tennyson insisted that he was not a person who favoured or delighted in war, and of course later ages have had little difficulty seeing through his ideological confusions on this matter. If we shift the overtones of Bosquet's observation just a little I think we may see past the evident confusions of Tennyson's mind to its (perhaps) not so evident clarities. For 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' describes a cruel and stupid military event as if it were a spiritual, even an aesthetic, triumph. *But of course* this isn't war, it is magnificence, it is glory. The poem's images present the cavaliers as if they were cast in a tableau, or in a heroic painting-and in one case at least, as if they were statues. The Light Brigade comes before us in Tennyson's poem as an aesthetic object, as we see very clearly in the fourth stanza, where the riders are made to assume the classic pose of the equestrian hero in action. Such a figure lived in the nineteenth-century's eye in a whole array of paintings and statues, some great (e.g., in the work of David, Gros, Gericault, and Delacroix), some merely ordinary (e.g., in the statuary familiar throughout the cities of Europe).

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

The fact that the military gestures in 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' are modelled upon a certain tradition of heroic military art is extremely important to see. For that artistic tradition is almost entirely French and it emerges out of the Romantic styles which were connected with Napoleon, the First Empire, and the exploits of the *Grande Armee.* One has merely to compare, say, David's famous portrait of Napoleon with any of the portraits of Wellington, or even of Nelson, in order to perceive the gulf which separates their ideological points of view. Like Gros' s portrait of Murat at the Battle of Aboukir, or Gericault's famous picture of the *chasseur* of the Imperial Guard, David's picture is charged throughout with various signs of Romantic motion, force, and energy. English painting of the same period never triumphed in this style. Consequently, in the immediately subsequent history the French *chasseurs* of the Napoleonic wars became heroic models throughout European art and culture, whereas the English cavaliers are either models of equestrian decorum, or objects of broad ridicule-in the last instance, mere aristocratic dandies. Besides, the fact that the heroic French *chasseur* did not

come from the well-born and elite classes of society was an important element in his ideological significance. In this respect he came to stand for the human meaning of the historical events which tore Europe apart at the end of the eighteenth century. Napoleon's world-historical import was epitomized in the figure of the French *chasseur,* whose exploits in battle overshadowed and surpassed in glory the military acts of Europe's congregated elite forces:

Wellington had won the battle of Waterloo, but England had lost to France the ideological struggle which followed. Indeed, the ancestors of Tennyson's Light Brigade had been present at Waterloo, but their presence was hardly noted and not decisive. Out of the defeat of Napoleon's grand army, artists like Gros and Gericault snatched a brilliant aesthetic triumph. Tennyson's poem deliberately, if perhaps only half-consciously, enters into this complex historical network in order, as it were, to gain for the English cavalry the emblems of the heroism they deserved, but had never had.

Thus it is opportune that it should have been the French who stood by at Balaclava to comment upon the English cavalry's charge. 'All the world wondered' at this charge, but that worldwide wonder was appropriately registered in a French accent. More than anyone else they would have understood the meaning of the charge for it was carried out in a famous French manner: the measured, deliberate pace of the Light Brigade's advance had been the wonder of Europe since the grand army invented and defined it.

Tennyson's poem, then, represents an effort to appropriate for an English consciousness those images of heroism which had been defined in another, antithetical culture. The poem conceals an act of revisionist historical criticism, an 'Englishing', as it were, of certain French possessions. This revisionist act emphasizes the predominant motive of the entire poem, however, which is to institute through the art of poetry a change of meaning analogous to the one which Oros and Oericault instituted earlier through their painting. The world's wonder at Waterloo had been focused on Napoleon and his armies, despite the fact that England and Wellington had won the military encounter. But the Light Brigade's act at Balaclava offered to Tennyson the chance to change the outcome of England's spiritual and ideological defeat.

Tennyson's method, therefore, is grounded in a set of paradoxes, the most fundamental of which is that his model should have been French and Romantic rather than English and Victorian. Out of this basic paradox Tennyson constructs a series of new and changed views on certain matters of real cultural importance. Most clearly he wants to show that the charge was not a military disaster but a spiritual triumph, and that the men of the English cavalry are not dandified and enervated aristocrats-that they are not merely 'noble still', they are the deathless spiritual leader of their country. These changes of meaning are epitomized in the poem's most notable linguistic transformation, whereby Tennyson manages to suggest that the name of the 'Light Brigade' bears a meaning which transcends its technical military significance. The pun on the word 'Light' points to the quasi-religious identity and mission of this small brigade of cavalry. Indeed, in that pun we observe Tennyson moving his poem out of his secular and non-verbal French models into a Victorian set of attitudes which are peculiarly his own....

This historical reading of Tennyson's poem is an attempt to restore it to our consciousness in something that approximates to its own original terms. The purpose of such a reading, however, is not to make us sympathize with the poem on its own terms-to submit to the poem's peculiar mid-Victorian ideological attitudes. On the contrary, the aim of the analysis is to make us aware of the ideological gulf which separates us from the human world evoked through Tennyson's poem. 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' embodies certain specific ideological formations, and it attaches these attitudes and feelings to certain specific events. Everything about this poem-everything about every poem that has ever been written-is time-and place-specific. This we sometimes forget. But we also tend to forget, when considering the employment of an historical criticism, that every reader of every poem is equally time-and place-specific. The function of an historical criticism, properly executed and understood, is to clarify the historical particularities of the entire aesthetic event, whether observed from the vantage of the original work, on the one hand, or of the later reader(s) of that work on the other. A collision of ideologies and consciousness will necessarily take place when such a criticism is set in motion.

Out of that conflict-which is one way of undergoing the aesthetic experience-emerges the sort of light and understanding which poetry was meant to bring: what I would have to call critical sympathy. In the case of 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', we re-experience the original Victorian response to that most pitiful of all events: a blundered tragic action. Some of Tennyson's contemporaries, and a large part of Tennyson himself, saw the charge at Balaclava as a kind of heroic tragedy-in the words of one correspondent, *'a grand national sacrifice'.* But another part of the population, and another part of Tennyson, understood that it was only a *kind* of heroic tragedy, and that its blundered and failed aspects gave it a different quality altogether. For in the end the poem rests in an evident, a simple, yet a profound contradiction which is the basis of all its related sets of contradictions. The Light Brigade achieved, in its famous assault, an immortality, a final spiritual triumph. In the event it suffered as well, in the words of *The Times,* a human 'catastrophe', an 'annihilation'. This triumph is also 'The disaster... of which the mere shadow has darkened so many a household among us.' Tennyson's poetry is in the pity even as it is also in the glory.

The poem, in other words, embodies an original set of contradictions which can be of use to us as its inheritors, as its subsequent readers. For we too, like Tennyson and his contemporaries, intersect with our own age and experience-including our experience with this poem-in certain specific and ideologically determined ways. 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' is important for us precisely because of the differential which it necessarily represents. Indeed, I should even venture to say that its importance as a cultural resource, for us today, will be a function of our immediate lack of interest in it or hostility toward it. Time and human experience-which are the measures of all future experience-have sanctioned the achievement of this work. Whatever immediate or practical usefulness it may have rests with us, and particularly with those of us (or that part of oursel ves) who feel most alienated from the (piteous, not tragic) human experience enacted in this poem.

Source: Jerome J. McGann, "Interpretation and Critical History," in *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory,* Clarendon Press, 1985, pp. 191-202.

Adaptations

The Charge of the Light Brigade, directed by Michael Curtiz and starring Errol Flynn, Olivia De Haveland, and Patric Knowles, was released by Warner Brothers in 1936.

Another film version of *The Charge of the Light Brigade,* directed by Tony Richardson and starring Harry Andrews, Vanessa Redgrave, and Trevor Howard, was released by United Artists in 1968.

Topics for Further Study

In this poem, Tennyson takes a famous defeat and stirs enthusiasm in the reader by focusing on the spirit of the soldiers, who rode into battle knowing they would be defeated. Write a poem about a similar situation, possibly involving a sports team or a politician, making defeat look like an opportunity to be noble and brave.

Imagine that you are a member of the Russian Army, who the Light Brigade made their brave but hopeless charge against. Write a letter home, describing what you saw and why you think they ran right into the face of certain death.

What do you think is the significance of having the Light Brigade temporarily victorious in stanza 4? Does it add to the story's tension? Does it make these brave soldiers more admirable? How?

Compare and Contrast

Then: Victoria's rule as Queen of Great Britain and Ireland, and Empress of India, influenced all aspects of economy and society.

Now: The Royal Family of Great Britain holds only symbolic power and is as much a source for scandal as for inspiration.

Then: William Russell of the London *Times* serves as the first real war correspondent, relaying information, including stories about the army's problems, to the English public.

Now: All major U.S. television networks have correspondents stationed in Kuwait, allowing them to offer live coverage of the Persian Gulf War of 1991.

What Do I Read Next?

Priestley's *Victoria's Heyday* (1974) captures the spirit of Queen Victoria's reign in year-by-year chapters, including an in-depth discussion of the Crimean War. Priestley, a famous novelist, uses pictures, gossip, and a fun, lightly sarcastic voice to tell the tale.

John D. Jump edited a 1967 volume called *Ten nyson: the Critical Heritage* that almost every student of Tennyson eventually runs across. It contains critical essays dating from Tennyson's first publications up to today, showing how attitudes have altered during the past 150 years. Especially interesting is the way Tennyson was characterized by H.A. Taine in 1864 as the perfect symbol of stuffy Victorian England; poet A.C. Swinburne's touchy response to Taine, in 1868; and R.H. Hutton's 1888 reply to Swinburne.

Tennyson's correspondences have been collected and published in three volumes. The volume that covers the Crimean War and the period of time when he wrote "The Charge of the Light Brigade" is *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson, volume II: 1851-1870,* edited by Cecil Y. Lang and Edgar F. Shannon. Published in 1987, this volume offers a fascinating look at the poet's inner thoughts.

Hundreds of war stories have been written throughout the years. Some, such as "The Charge of the Light Brigade," praise heroic actions, while others draw attention to war's horrors. One of the best examples of the second kind is Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* about the American Civil War.

Tennyson's career spanned the end of the Romantic age as it led into the Victorian age. He and Walt Whitman had great respect for each other's works, although it is hard to think of two poets whose techniques are more different. Whitman was an independent American who wrote in free verse and a pacifist who detested war. His *Leaves of Grass,* first published in 1855 and reprinted constantly since, gives readers an idea of the range of poetry written at the time.

Further Study

Kissane, James, *Alfred Tennyson,* New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1970.

Kissane's analysis of Tennyson's poems is very involved and clear: he looks at them as poems, not as outdated fragments of history, and he writes about them in a way that is easy to understand. This book is a perfect place to start for the reader who wishes to understand the author as a craftsman.

Tennyson, Charles, "Tennyson as Poet Laureate," in *Tennyson,* edited by D.J. Palmer, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1973, pp. 203-225.

Although this essay only mentions "The Charge of the Light Brigade" briefly, almost with embarrassment-as an example among others of "attempted popular poems"-the author gives a good sense of how social forces influenced Tennyson's subject choices in his later years.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

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When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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