

## AQA Poetry Anthology - Power and Conflict Collection (Part 2)

*Including: The Charge of the Light Brigade, Exposure, Storm on the Island and Bayonet Charge.*

### The Charge of the Light Brigade (Alfred Lord Tennyson)

#### Context

Tennyson wrote *The Charge of the Light Brigade* in the aftermath of one of the most famous (and deadly) battles of the Crimean War (1853-56). The Crimean War was fought between Russia on the one side and an alliance including Britain and France on the other. The battle was *The Battle of Balaclava*. During the fighting, a mistake - possibly from a misheard order - led to six hundred British cavalry of the Light Brigade charging into a valley surrounded by Russian heavy cannons - essentially a suicide charge! Many of the Light Brigade were killed or injured in the battle.

When the news of the catastrophe got back to Britain it was one of the first times that the public had heard about a military blunder in detail. The Crimean war was the first war where journalists were reporting back from near the front line. The news led to the first serious questions being asked about the decisions made by commanders and the consequences for ordinary soldiers. There was a feeling of anger towards some of the commanders, contrasted with a genuine appreciation of the bravery and sacrifice of the soldiers of the Light Brigade.

#### Content

Tennyson captured this mood in his poem. He is full of praise and admiration for the soldiers, while showing his anger at the commanders whose blunders led to their deaths. *The Charge of the Light Brigade* tells the story of the battle from the “blunder’d” order which started the charge, through their engagement with the Russian soldiers and guns, to their retreat back from the “mouth of hell”.

Tennyson ends with a final stanza praising the undying glory and honour of the six hundred soldiers of the Light Brigade.

#### Form and Structure

The poem is structured in 6 stanzas - one for each hundred soldiers of the Light Brigade. The form, rhythm and structure of the poem are **designed to reflect the onward charge of the horses, and then the vicious fighting of the battle**. The first stanza is 8 lines long, followed by two 9 line stanzas mirroring the increasing pace of the charge. The fourth and fifth stanzas are particularly long (12 and 11 lines respectively) as Tennyson depicts the frenzied slog of the hand-to-hand fighting and dangerous retreat. The final short stanza reflects the loss of life and leaves the reader pondering the message of the poem - “honour the charge they made”.

The rhythm of the poem in the first three stanzas makes it hard to read the poem without sounding like you’re riding on a charging horse. As with the stanza length, this then breaks down in stanzas 4 and 5 as the fighting dominates the action.

#### Language

Tennyson uses a range of interesting language and techniques to reflect the story of the charge and the honour of the soldiers. Notably the first **three stanzas contain examples of repetition** “half a league, half a league, half a league onward”; “Rode the six hundred... Rode the six hundred... Rode the six hundred”; and “cannon to the right of them, cannon to the left of them, cannon in front of them”. This combines with the rhythm to enhance the feeling of galloping horses. **The direct speech** of “Forward the Light Brigade! Charge the guns... Forward the Light Brigade!” emphasises their bravery and places the reader in amongst the charging soldiers.

The famous lines: “Theirs not to make reply, theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die.” highlights the bravery and honour of the soldiers against the confusion of their commander’s orders.

As the hand-to-hand fighting commences in stanza 4 Tennyson emphasises the glimmering and slashing “sabres” as he repeats the word “flash’d” and then **includes sibilance to show the brutality of the fighting** - “Reel’d from the sabre-stroke shatter’d and sunder’d”. This is followed in stanza 5 by more repetition - “cannon to the left of them... etc” as the remaining soldiers begin their retreat.

Finally, in stanza 6 Tennyson ends with a **rhetorical question** “When can their glory fade?” and repetition of the word “honour” to hammer home his praise of the soldiers’ bravery.

### **Imagery**

There is some really strong **biblical imagery** throughout this poem to highlight the deadly nature of the charge and the bravery of the soldiers. “Into the valley of Death” is taken directly from a biblical psalm and this image is extended with “into the jaws of Death and into the mouth of Hell”. Tennyson is essentially saying the soldiers rode to hell and back as they “came thro’ the jaws of Death back from the mouth of Hell”.

### **Themes**

Tennyson’s main message is to praise the courage of the the men of the Light Brigade. He shows his anger at the poor leadership - “some had blunder’d” - but still suggests it is honourable to fight and die for your country, “Theirs was not to reason why, theirs was but to do and die”. The command at the end of the poem for the reader to “Honour the charge they made” leaves us in little doubt what Tennyson wants us to take away from the poem.

## **Exposure (Wilfred Owen)**

### **Context**

Wilfred Owen is one of the most famous war poets. he fought in the First World War and his poems reflect his experiences of war and the reality of conflict. During the war people back in Britain did not get the sort of information we get today about war. There was heavy censorship from the government and obviously no TV to show the reality of the front line. As a result many soldiers felt people back home did not understand how horrific war was. For poets like Owen their writing was a way of conveying the reality and expressing their horror at modern warfare.

During the First World War (1914-1918) a network of trenches were dug by both sides across France and Belgium. Both armies were locked in a stalemate along these lines for much of the war. There were huge battles with massive losses of life, but in-between the battles soldiers had to wait in their trenches exposed to the elements. The winter of 1917 was particularly cold and caused many soldiers to suffer from hypothermia and frostbite. It is in this context that Owen wrote Exposure.

Owen himself joined the army in 1915. He suffered severe ‘shell shock’ in 1917 and was hospitalised. While in hospital Owen met the already famous war poet Siegfried Sassoon who recognised and encouraged Owen’s talent. Owen went on to return to the front line and was killed just a few days before the end of the war in November 1918. He was just 26 years old.

### **Content**

Exposure focuses on the long, dull, grim days in-between battles where the weather and modern weaponry took its toll on soldiers physically and psychologically. There is no glory or honour for soldiers here. Only boredom, illness, fear, injury and death.

## Form and Structure

The poem is structured in 8 stanzas, each with 5 lines. The **final line of each stanza is very short** to add emphasis to its message. The final lines are either the **repeated phrase**, “But nothing happens”, or a **rhetorical question**. Both show the despair of the soldiers and the pointlessness of their situation. The rhythm of the poem adds to this message - it breaks down at various points, particularly in the final short lines of each stanza.

The first four lines of each stanza have a **fairly regular ‘abba’ rhyme** to convey the consistency of the soldiers’ experience. The difficulties they are facing go on and on without change. However, **some of the rhymes are half-rhymes**, “knife us/ nervous”, “wire/ war” and “brambles/ rumbles”. This adds to the sense of unease as the men fear the effects of the weather and the constant threat of death.

## Language

Exposure is filled with **emotive language, a tortured tone** and clever techniques to draw the reader in and make us feel the horror and desperation of Owen and his comrades. This starts with the title - “Exposure” - at face value this is referring to the soldiers’ exposure to the elements and weather. However, it also refers to the soldiers’ exposure to the horrors of war, and going even further, we could interpret the word “exposure” as emphasising how the public back in Britain are being “exposed” to the realities of war.

Owen consistently **uses pronouns** throughout the poem, “our”, “us”, “we” to show how this is a collective experience of all soldiers in the First World War. It also invites the reader to imagine they are part of this group on the front line, creating a powerful sense of solidarity.

**Alliteration and assonance** is used to great effect in the poem. For example the repeated ‘s’ sound in, “Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence”, reflects the sound of bullets whizzing past the soldiers. Assonance is used in the third stanza with the repeated ‘o’ sound, “soak... know... grow”. The length of the ‘o’ sounds could be interpreted as emphasising the monotonous nature of life in the trenches.

The **repetition of “But nothing happens”** is very important and is used by Owen to show us the boring monotony of life in the trenches. Full battles were relatively rare and soldiers were faced with long periods of time just sat in their trench exposed to horrible conditions. This was not the glorified version of battle that many people back home imagined, so Owen is emphasising the reality of war again here.

To expose the reader further to this reality, Owen uses **lists of emotive words** to describe the soldiers’ feelings and fears: “worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous”. Owen compliments this with the use of rhetorical questions: “what are we doing here?” and “is it that we are dying?” to show the futility of war and the certainty of death felt by soldiers. For them life and death are now inextricably linked and it’s difficult for them to tell if they are alive or dead.

## Imagery

Owen creates a number of important images for the reader, showing us in vivid detail the horrific nature of his experience. In the second stanza Owen describes the “mad gusts tugging on the wire, like twitching agonies of men among the brambles”. Here he is **personifying the gusts of wind** and using a **simile** to liken the sound of the wind on barbed wire to soldiers in agony. This is very emotive and even upsetting for the reader, transporting us onto the front line.

Later, **natural elements are again personified** to show the reader how the elements are as deadly an enemy as the German soldiers, “Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army attacks once more in shivering ranks of grey”. Here the dawn is directly portrayed as an army - emphasising the idea that exposure to nature as the real enemy.

This idea is developed further in stanza 4 as the weather is portrayed as more deadly than enemy bullets, “sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence. Less deadly than the air that shudders black with snow”.

Then, by the final stanza, death and the weather come together, “The burying party, picks and shovels in the shaking grasp, pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice”. By this point the soldiers are completely accustomed to death and even see their own death as inevitable.

### Themes

Owen’s main theme is about the **reality of warfare in the First World War**. He describes the crippling monotony of life in the trenches and the debilitating effects of the weather on the soldiers. The weather is the real enemy to Owen and his comrades, not necessarily the Germans. Owen wants to get this message across to people back home in Britain.

**Despair and loss of faith** are also considered. Soldiers are shown in complete despair, having essentially given up on life due to the conditions they are enduring. They are even seen to have lost any faith they had in God, “For love of God seems dying”.

## Storm on the Island (Seamus Heaney)

### Context

Seamus Heaney is from a rural part of County Derry in Northern Ireland. He grew up on his family’s farm, which influenced a lot of his poetry to focus on the countryside and nature. Heaney is one of the most famous Irish poets of the twentieth century and has taught literature at Oxford and Harvard Universities.

### Content

Storm on the Island is about exactly that. Heaney describes being in an isolated cottage on the cliffs of an island off the coast of Ireland while a terrible storm rages around him. Heaney describes the power of the weather and nature. He suggests that the people on the island can do nothing in the face of this natural power.

### Form and Structure

The poem is structured as **one 19 line stanza all in blank verse** (lines that do not rhyme and have 5 beats per line). Blank verse makes poetry follow the style of natural spoken English, so it is as if the poet is talking directly to us.

### Language

The first part of the poem describes how the islanders have prepared for the storm. **the tone is relatively confident**, “We are prepared: we build our houses squat, sink walls in rock and roof them with good slate”. The verbs “build”, “sink” and “roof” show the actions the islanders have taken to prepare to face the power of nature. Heaney then adds to the feel of a story teller with the line “you know what I mean”, as if he is talking directly to us.

Then the storm hits and Heaney uses some **really powerful language** to show the strength of its force, “pummels”, “exploding”, “flung”, “savage” and “bombarded”. **The tone has changed to one of fear and respect** for the awesome power of nature. The isolation is also emphasised with the focus on the lack of defence and help provided by the natural features on the island, “But there are no trees, no natural shelter... But no”. Here the repetition of “but” and “no” show the lack of any natural barriers to the power of the storm. Nothing can stop it.

**Enjambment** (where lines run on from one to the next) is used quite regularly to show the sudden changes in the weather and the impact on the island, “when it blows full / Blast” and “tame cat / Turned savage”. Both of these examples add emphasis to the words “blast” and “savage”, showing the power of the storm.

The final line is really important, “Strange, it is a huge nothing that we fear”. Heaney finishes with the paradox that the storm is an adversary they cannot see, but with a huge power they fear. This unknown element of the storm makes it all the more scary.

### Imagery

The most powerful imagery created by Heaney is **the storm as military weaponry attacking the island**. “wind dives and strafes invisibly. Space is a salvo. We are bombarded by the empty air”. The use of military words like “strafes”, “salvo” and “bombarded” creates the image of an organised warfare from the storm.

### Themes

For the AQA GCSE course in particular, the most important theme of Storm on the Island is the **power of nature**. In the face of this power the humans on the island are fearful and there is nothing they can do other than be prepared and hope to wait out the storm. The military language used by Heaney shows that this power of nature can be violent and unforgiving.

## Bayonet Charge (Ted Hughes)

### Context

Ted Hughes was born in Yorkshire in 1930 and lived until 1998. His upbringing in the countryside influenced a lot of his writing and he is well known for his children’s books as well as his poetry. As a young man, Ted Hughes served in the RAF for two years before going to University.

### Content

Bayonet Charge is about a soldier charging enemy trenches in the First World War (1914-18). This is an unusual topic for a Ted Hughes poem. A bayonet is a long knife that soldiers attach to the end of their rifles and a ‘bayonet charge’ was used regularly in the First World War as a tactic for taking over enemy trenches. During the poem the soldier describes being transformed from someone who is thinking actively about what is going on around him, and someone who believed in “king, honour and human dignity”, into someone desperate just to survive and get out of the “blue crackling air” of the battlefield.

### Form and Structure

The poem is structured in **three stanzas** with a very **varied length of individual lines**. The changes in line lengths could suggest the changing speed of the soldier as he looks to progress across the battlefield and is occasionally slowed by enemy fire, or as he ducks into cover. The first stanza in particular is broken up by a lot of dashes, giving the idea that the soldier’s flow of thought is being broken up as he realises the nature of the chaos of battle going on around him.

Hughes also uses a lot of **enjambment** (where lines run on with no full-stop), even between stanzas. This reflects the speed of the attack and the increasingly frantic thoughts of the soldier himself.

### Language

In the first two lines Hughes **repeats the word “raw”**, “running-raw in raw-seamed hot khaki”. This immediately gives the reader a sense of the uncomfortable, harsh nature of the charge for the soldier, before we even begin to start thinking about the bullets and bombs coming from the enemy.

**Words associated with movement** are also used regularly in the first stanza, “running” and “stumbling”, to show how the soldier is constantly charging over the course of the poem. We see how difficult his progress is made by the “raw-seamed hot khaki” (Khaki was a type of clothing worn by soldiers) and the “field of clods”. The soldier’s effort and increasing terror is shown further by the use of words like “suddenly”, “running”, “sweat heavy”, “lugged” and “sweating”.

The language of stanza two **shifts the focus of the poem to “bewilderment”** at the situation the soldier has found himself in. He also questions how this has happened and why he is continuing to run despite his fear and uncertainty. The **rhetorical question**, “In what cold clockwork of the stars and the nations was he the hand pointing that second?”, evokes the idea of fate and questions whether he is destined to survive. The use of the word “cold” shows how uncaring this fate is. The questioning and uncertainty of the soldier is then developed with the **simile**, “he was running like a man who has jumped up in the dark and runs listening between the footfalls for the reason of his still running”. Basically, the soldier can’t understand how he is still managing to run towards the enemy trenches.

In the final stanza Hughes lists the things that have become “luxuries” to the soldier, “king, honour, human dignity, etcetera”. All of these things that had an importance to him before the battle have been superseded by his desire to survive as his instincts have taken over.

### Imagery

Imagery is used effectively throughout the poem to emphasise the ideas discussed above. In the first stanza **Hughes personifies the air** with the metaphor, “bullets smacking the belly out of the air”. This gives the reader an idea of the sounds of battle, while also suggesting that many of this soldier’s comrades are being struck by the bullets.

Hughes also creates a powerful image with the simile describing the soldier’s rifle, “he lugged a rifle numb as a smashed arm”. Not only does this show how heavy and cumbersome the rifle is, which slows the soldier’s progress, but it also again creates an **image of the injury and death** going on around the soldier without directly describing it - “smashed arm”. The soldier is trying not to focus on the horrors around him, but can’t ignore the terrible injuries.

In the final stanza we see another image created of the “yellow hare”. As with the earlier descriptions of the “hedge” and the “field of clods”, **Hughes is describing the nature around the soldier and contrasting this with the violence of battle**. The hare becomes an image of death at the end of the poem as it “rolled like a flame and crawled in a threshing circle”. Again, Hughes uses an image of death rather than directly describing the deaths around the soldier. This shows how the soldier is trying to block out the horror of battle around him.

### Themes

Bayonet Charge puts the reader in the mind of a soldier as he charges across no man’s land towards enemy trenches. We’re given a vivid description of the soldier’s changing thoughts and shown how by the end his only focus is on surviving as his instincts take over. He’s no longer a real person, he just wants to get out of the field. In this way the main theme of the poem is **the human response to conflict**.