The Charge of the Light Brigade  
Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809 – 1892), is one of the most famous poets in English literature. Many of his poems are standards of 19th-century literature and are critical and popular favorites. The body of critical work on him is immense, and although some of his work is seen as too sentimental today, his intellectual contributions to poetry and metaphysics are undeniable.

The Crimean War was a conflict between the Russian Empire and the forces of the British Empire, French Empire, Ottoman Empire, and Kingdom of Sardinia. It spanned three years, from 1853 to 1856, and was largely concerned with the territories of the Ottoman Empire, which by this time was in decline. The famous charge of the British light cavalry led by Lord Cardigan against Russian forces took place at the Battle of Balaclava on October 25, 1854. Lord Raglan, overall commander of the British forces, had intended to send the Light Brigade to pursue and harry a retreating Russian artillery battery, a task well suited to light cavalry. Due to miscommunication in the chain of command, the Light Brigade was instead sent into a frontal assault against a different artillery battery, one well-prepared with excellent fields of defensive fire. The British were valorous but were cut to pieces and retreated with immense casualties (some estimates say 247 of the 637 died).

As the poet laureate of England, Tennyson published this heroic and rousing poem in the Examiner on December 9, 1854, to commemorate the valiant actions of the light brigade that fought this battle in the Crimean War. It is said that Tennyson read a newspaper article about the Battle of Balaclava, where the charge took place, and wrote this poem within a matter of minutes. Tennyson’s son said later that the phrase from the article “some hideous blunder” caught his imagination; in the poem Tennyson’s words are “some one had blunder’d.” The poem was also included in an 1855 publication of his works. It was tremendously popular during its day, especially as it celebrated both the military and the common man’s perspective.

The Charge of the Light Brigade  
Alfred, Lord Tennyson  
Memorializing Events in the Battle of Balaclava, October 25, 1854  
Written 1854

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.
'Forward, the Light Brigade!'  
Was there a man dismay'd?  
Not tho' the soldier knew  
Some one had blunder'd:  
Theirs not to make reply,  
Theirs not to reason why,  
Theirs but to do & die,  
Into the valley of Death  
Rode the six hundred.  

Cannon to right of them,  
Cannon to left of them,  
Cannon in front of them  
Volley'd & thunder'd;  
Storm'd at with shot and shell,  
Boldly they rode and well,  
Into the jaws of Death,  
Into the mouth of Hell  
Rode the six hundred.  

Flash'd all their sabres bare,  
Flash'd as they turn'd in air  
Sabring the gunners there,  
Charging an army while  
All the world wonder'd:  
Plung'd in the battery-smoke  
Right thro' the line they broke;  
Cossack & Russian  
Reel'd from the sabre-stroke,  
Shatter'd & sunder'd.  
Then they rode back, but not  
Not the six hundred.  

Cannon to right of them,  
Cannon to left of them,  
Cannon behind them  
Volley'd and thunder'd;  
Storm'd at with shot and shell,  
While horse & hero fell,  
They that had fought so well  
Came thro' the jaws of Death,  
Back from the mouth of Hell,  
All that was left of them,  
Left of six hundred.  

When can their glory fade?  
O the wild charge they made!  
All the world wonder'd.  
Honour the charge they made!  
Honour the Light Brigade,  
Noble six hundred!