

The charge of the
light brigade by alfred
lord tennyson and the
deserter by winif...



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In this piece of coursework, I will be examining the images of 'the fighting man' as portrayed by the poets, Winifred Letts and Alfred Lord Tennyson who I have been studying. The two poems I have analysed are "The Charge of the Light Brigade" by Alfred Lord Tennyson and "The Deserter" by Winifred Mary Letts. "The Charge of the Light Brigade" was written pre 1900. "The Deserter" was written post 1900. There are many differences between the two poems especially the way the writers portrayed war and soldiers' reaction to war. "The Charge of the Light Brigade" by Alfred Lord Tennyson is a poem that was written during the Crimean War in November 1854.

The war started when Britain and France confronted Russia over their claim to lands in Turkey. The Allied army landed in Crimea to oppose Russia. The Russians then attacked the British base at Balaclava. The devastating charge of the light brigade occurred on a November morning at Balaclava at the Black Sea area of Russia known as Crimea. The British cavalry commander was the Earl of Cardigan, whose misunderstanding of his orders led to the suicidal charge of the light brigade.

Six hundred British cavalry men took part in the charge and each soldier was on horseback with only one weapon. This weapon was a sabre which is a curved sword. The courageous six hundred rode straight down a valley without questioning orders or even thinking about what they were told to do. When the soldiers went into the valley, they were surrounded by cannons. They tried to attack with their swords but they had no chance. Three quarters of the cavalry men were killed all because of a mistake one person had made.

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The army's problems were made public by the first real war correspondent, William H. Russell of the 'London Times'. He wrote a report on the charge. Alfred Lord Tennyson read the report and later wrote a poem about the misconception that happened during the charge of the light brigade. Alfred Lord Tennyson used words and phrases from the article in 'The Times' to write the poem, such as "Last century", "sabres", "flashing", gunners and clouds of smoke. In stanza 1, Tennyson uses a rhythm of marching. This may have been used to give us the impression of how proud, brave and happy the soldiers were, marching without a worry.

He uses "Valley of Death", which is a metaphor to highlight the horror they were going to enter. He tells the story of 600 men, who set off proudly into a valley. Capitals were used for "Valley of Death" to personify it. Perhaps he wanted to show death as a cruel person. Direct speech was also used to emphasize the exact command of order e. g. "Forward the Light Brigade! Charge for the guns"! In the second stanza, the poet states the order made by someone. "Forward the light Brigade" He does not mention who says it. He shows no emotion, anger or bitterness towards the mistake. He only questioned how someone made such a mistake.

Tennyson gives us the illusion that the soldiers were well disciplined as they never questioned their commands e. g. "Theirs not to make reply Theirs not to reason why Theirs but to do and die" They followed the orders made to them until their death. Rhyme is used to emphasise their strength of character and discipline. This also gives us the impression of them speeding into the valley. Rhyme is also used to represent the men going swiftly into

battle without looking back. The use of alliteration in “Theirs but to do and die” makes us more aware that these soldiers were going to die.

Alliteration is again used in verse 3 to give us a feel of the action – “Stormed at with shot and shell”. As the main events unfold the poet describes how the cavalry rode defiantly into the valley to confront the opposition, who unhesitatingly bombarded them with cannons from all sides. In verse 3, there is a sense in the rhythm of slowing down, which I think suggests that the tasks had weakened them “Cannon to..... Cannon to..... Cannon in front” The poet also uses repetition in verse 3 to stress the hopelessness of their task.

When the poet describes the valley as “Jaws of Death” and “mouth of hell”, he forces upon us the enormity of what they were facing. Death is again personified as it is given a capital letter. The theme of the poem is death. “Rode the six hundred”, is repeated at the end of each verse to remind us of the large number of brave men and reminding us not to forget. Stanza 4 describes the gallant counter attack made by the British men in the face of a more powerful army. Tennyson uses facts from ‘The Times’ report in this verse.

He uses alliteration and onomatopoeia e. g. “Flashed all their sabres bare, flashed as they turned in air, sabring the gunners their”. This emphasises the quickness, ferocity and fearlessness of the horsemen’s attack on the Russian gunners. The use of alliteration make the attack significant and memorable. He finishes the stanza by telling us that they rode back, repeating the word “not” to emphasis that many had lost their lives. The first four lines of Stanza

5 are a repetition of Stanza 3, when the poet was describing how the cavalry were attacked as they rode gallantly into the valley. They are now retreating.

There is a rhythm of marching “ right”, “ left”. The poet also shows pity for the soldiers as well as admiration. In the last two lines of this Stanza, repetition of the “ left” gives an idea of the amount of men killed. “ All that was left of them”. In the final verse, there are six lines which give the idea of one line for every one hundred cavalymen. The poet speaks directly to us, he questions us and clearly demands that we should never forget the bravery of the Light Brigade. Words such as “ Honour” and Noble” shows the importance of the battle. Tennyson commands that they never be forgotten. | Honour the charge they made!! “.

To further remind us of the number of soldiers who died, Tennyson wrote this poem in six verses – one verse for every one hundred soldiers who lost their lives. I feel this poem, while pointing out the bravery of the soldiers reminds us constantly of the stupidity and foolishness of war. The poem assures us that the commander’s error, which led to the death of these brave men should never be forgotten. I have also studied the poem “ the Deserter” by Winifred Mary Letts, who was an Irish poet. Winifred was born in County Wexford in 1882 and died in 1936.

She had written a volume of war poems. During the war she served as a nurse at various base hospitals. Before the world wars, poets had absolutely no knowledge or involvement of the honour and terror of war and so the images they gave were imprecise. They represented the soldiers as being brave, heroic and prepared to die for their country. The soldiers were also

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portrayed as never showing cowardliness and anxiety. During the nineteenth century the soldiers began to write. Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon are three extremely famous war poets of many thousands.

Most of the soldiers that fought in the World Wars wrote their lines as a form of therapy and as an expression of their emotions. Their poems were plain and to the point. I think that they wanted to let the rest of the world know what war and the effects of war were really like. “The Deserter” is about a young soldier who was terrified of confronting the opposition and maybe even death, so he ran away from his position and deserted his commands. He was shot because he turned his back on his own side. In the first line of the poem the poet writes “Don’t mind his name”. Which emphasises how unimportant he was.

Fear” is personified to portray how he had to play a large part in the war. The images of the ‘brave’ ‘heroic’ men that was shown in the previous poetry was shattered. The soldier was just a normal person whose first instinct, when he saw the enemy approaching him was to turn and run away.

Repetition was used in:- “turned and ran away” to highlight the natural fear that overcomes a person and their automatic response. In lines 10 – 15 the poet gives the illusion that a panic attack was taking place and it takes control of the soldier’s body which leads him to being unable to think rationally. His knees were shaking under him”.

“His breath came fast, his eyes were wild”. The war and his natural fear of death had stolen the soldier’s bravery and courage. The poet goes on to express how the young soldier was cornered by his own and shot at dawn. “

They shot him when the dawn was grey". This quotation lets us know how the British were so mortified at the 'desertion' that they murdered him when the world was asleep. In the last few lines of the poem, the poet emphasises how the mother was proud of her son who had died a hero.

"His mother thinks he fought and fell he best, her hero son she gave" His mother had not been told otherwise. This reinforces the attitudes that people have on war. They see soldiers as being heroic, well-disciplined men ready to give up their lives for their country. There is an obvious comparison in the two poems I have studied. The first poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade" portrays the bravery, courage and fearlessness of war. It gives, us the reader, the impression that the soldiers are reliable and are willing to die for their country. The soldiers are portrayed as superhuman.

The second poem gives the reader a better insight and understanding of war. It gives us the idea that soldiers are ordinary people and they are not just heroes. It also shows us that they have a lot of fear in them and not all of them are as heroic as they are made out to be. Most of them are vulnerable human beings. I feel the second poem is a much better example of war poetry because it is much easier to understand that the soldiers were horrified of death and are therefore not portrayed as supermen. The first poem portrays the men as "fighting men". The writer does not do this in the second poem.

The two poems have some similarities as there were mistakes made by people in each one. In the first poem the commander made a very serious error, which led to hundreds of soldiers dying. Even though he made this slip

up, he was not shot. I feel he did not get punished because he was a commander. In the second poem, when the young soldier was confronted by the enemy he showed a natural reaction of fear causing him to desert his post. In this instance he was shot as a deserter. I feel that because he was just an ordinary soldier he was considered unimportant and disposable.

He was shot as an example to other soldiers who may have been considering desertion. These two poems confirm how war is senseless, unnecessary, cruel and pointless. It is obvious from the two poems that the experience of going to war and being able to see at first hand the grim reality of war has led to poets becoming more realistic in their portrayal of 'the fighting man'. No longer is he automatically assumed to be heroic but rather a more true to life picture is portrayed showing the fear and mistakes along with the bravery of the soldiers. Reading these poems has confirmed my belief that war is futile.