Crossing the Bar

POEM TEXT

Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
When I put out to sea,

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
When I embark;

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crost the bar.

SUMMARY

I notice the sunset and evening star in the sky, and hear a sound calling for me loud and clear. I hope that the sandbar will not be disturbed when I go out to sea.

Instead, I want to be carried out on a tide moving so slowly it seems almost asleep, and which is too swollen to make a sound or create a wash. That's what I want when I return home to the depths of the great unknown.

Twilight comes with the evening bell, which will be followed by darkness. There don't need to be any sad goodbyes when I go.

Even though I'll be going far from this time and place, floating on the tide of death, I hope to meet God, who has been like my pilot in this journey, when I've made it across the bar.

THEMES

DEATH, ACCEPTANCE, AND CHRISTIANITY

"Crossing the Bar" is a poem in which a speaker confronts the reality of imminent death—and finds a kind of peace in the thought of dying. Rather than being scared by death, the speaker presents it as a mere transition into another kind of life (specifically, the Christian afterlife). The speaker compares this to the crossing of a sandbar—the kind that marks the shift from a coastal area to a sea or ocean—and asks that there be no "sadness of farewell" on their behalf. The poem is thus inherently an argument in favor of accepting death, with the comforting knowledge of God's love as solace.

The speaker senses their time on earth is near an end, noting the "sunset" and "evening star," and even hearing a "clear call" that death is close at hand. This offers an opportunity for them to reflect on death. Building the metaphor of death as the crossing of a bar of sand, the speaker puts forward the idea that death is not something to fear—but just a quiet, near-seamless transition between two different states of being.

The poem opens with a kind of announcement, the speaker hearing the "clear call" that it is time for them to die. As the poem progresses and the speaker reveals their belief in the Christian God, it becomes apparent that the speaker sees this "call" as coming from God himself. Already, this establishes the idea that there is a God behind life and death, and that this coming death is part of God's plan—that death should not be feared because it is designed by God, who has people's best interests in mind.

As such, the speaker hopes that there "may be no moaning of the bar" when the speaker "put[s] out to sea." Why "moan," goes the speaker's argument, when death is part of God's plan. In essence, the speaker is saying that they hope there is no fear, sadness, or pain when they die—on the speaker's part or on the part of others. That's because, ultimately, the speaker doesn't see death as a true end.

The speaker prefers to die quietly, because to them that befits the belief that death is merely a transition. To disturb the sandbar, metaphorically speaking, would be to worry about death—to fear and even resist it. To die quietly on a metaphorical tide that is "too full for sound and foam," seems the most appropriate way to die.

The speaker does, however, acknowledge that dying means going somewhere very far away from the earthly realm: "For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place / The flood may bear me far." These lines draw a link between the ocean and eternity, putting forward the idea that the speaker is merely *returning* to the eternal realm from which they came. Indeed, the speaker believes that their life was part of God's plan—and so too is their death.

In fact, this journey from the earthly to the spiritual realm is even something to look forward to. That's because it's only

through dying that people can meet their "Pilot"—the Christian God. The speaker hopes to *know* God through death, to look at God "face to face." Accordingly, the speaker is in a way quietly but eagerly expecting death—not living in fear of it. Death brings with it a new kind of knowledge and experience that isn't available to the living. Most importantly, it leads to a reunion with God.

In summary, then, the poem insists that there is no reason to fear death. Instead, it argues that people should take solace in the rather paradoxical thought that death brings with it not an end, but a new beginning.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me!

"Crossing the Bar" opens with a metaphorical image, focusing on "Sunset and [the] evening star" to immediately suggest that something is coming to an end. Specifically, the speaker interprets these images of evening as a signal that the speaker's life is nearly over, as the poem later reveals explicitly.

Though it's not clear what Tennyson's intentions are specifically, the "evening star" is traditionally not a star at all—it is the planet Venus. Compared to other planetary bodies, Venus moves through the skies quite quickly, making it a kind of wandering "star" as well. This suggests the journey of life, the movement from one kind of time to another, eventually coming to rest with death.

Though the poem's main metaphor, which is based on sand and water, has not yet been put forward, the gentle sibilance of the first line (which is here composed of both consonance and alliteration) evokes in advance the kind of slow and quiet waves that the speaker later references:

> Sunset and evening star

In line 2, the speaker hears "one clear call." The speaker senses that their time has come, and the idea that this is marked by a "call" foreshadows the role that God will play later in the poem, as if God is beckoning the speaker back to Heaven. As the poem progresses, the idea of a heavenly afterlife will comfort the speaker. The alliteration of "clear call" is intentionally obvious, conveying the clarity of the "call" by making the /c/ sound more prominent. The exclamation mark at the end of the line also signals the metaphorical volume of this call—though the reader doesn't yet know what the call represents.

LINES 3-4

And may there be no moaning of the bar,
When I put out to sea,

Line 3 marks the start of the poem's longest phrase, which stretches from here to line 8. It's in this section that the poem makes its metaphorical intentions clear, in turn explaining the title too.

The "bar" referred to is not, of course, a drinking establishment. This bar is made of sand, and marks the transition from a coastal area into the wider ocean. The speaker here begins to draw parallels between crossing a bar and dying, using these parallels as an opportunity to reflect on death and its meaning. Later in the poem, the speaker reveals their belief in God and, accordingly, their trust that there is an afterlife that awaits them. If not referencing those beliefs specifically, these lines start describing the speaker's attitude towards death with religious faith in mind.

The "And" that starts line 3 is an example of polysyndeton that helps give the poem a slow, incremental pace much like the movement of tides that it describes. The use of polysyndeton is also very typical of the Bible—specifically the King James Version—which is a useful echo given that this is, essentially, a religious poem.

In these lines, the speaker makes a kind of rhetorical wish: that when they are "put out to sea" there will be "no moaning of the bar." That is, they hope that the sand bar will remain undisturbed by their passage over it. Of course, this is a metaphor. Being "put out to sea" relates to the speaker's death—and *not* disturbing the "bar" describes the way that they want to go. In essence, they are arguing *against* the fear of death, suggesting that dying need not be feared—because, as revealed at the end, they expect to meet God in the afterlife.

It's interesting to note the variation in line length here, which helps the movements of the tides (which are not uniform). Line 3 is iambic pentameter, while line 4 is iambic trimeter:

> And may | there be | no moan- | ing of | the bar,
> When I | put out | to sea

The gentle alliteration of "may" and "moaning" here suggests a careful kind of movement, precisely the type that the speaker hopes for in this metaphorical vision of their death.

LINES 5-8

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home.

In the second stanza, the speaker develops the metaphor of dying as crossing the sand bar. The speaker explains that they want their death to be similar to the way that a certain type of

tide can move almost without appearing to, one which is "too full for sound and foam." That is, the speaker perceives dying to be a quiet but significant transition between this world and the next—and accordingly they do not see it as something to fear.

Lines 7 and 8 imply that death is a kind of return to "the boundless deep," so instead of a journey into some terrifying unknown it is in fact more like a homecoming. This, of course, is based on the speaker's religious faith, which is made explicit in the final stanza.

The sibilance (a form of consonance) of line 5 is suggestive of both the sound of quiet waves and wispy breathing of somebody calmly "asleep":

> But such a tide as moving seems asleep

This has a gentle quality to it which fits with the speaker's ideals about death, also helped by the gentle pull of the assonant /e/ sound in the final three words of the line: "moving seems asleep."

As with elsewhere in the poem, the varying line lengths in this stanza help suggest the movement of waves. The poem strives to create a sense of calm and acceptance to match the speaker's attitude to death, and varying the lines contributes to this atmosphere, as if the speaker is flexible enough to accept whatever kind of death comes their way. Not many lines in the poem are enjambed, but the enjambment between lines 7 and 8 means that the phrase length is considerably long. This creates a feeling of gentle momentum, like the pull of the tides.

LINES 9-12

Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
When I embark;

The beginning of the third stanza (line 9) is very close in construction to the opening line, underscoring the idea that the speaker's death is near. In fact, now it is even that little bit closer, as the even has now shifted from "Sunset" to "twilight." This, of course, is a transition into increased darkness, which hints at the fact that what happens after death is ultimately unknown (though the speaker has a strong belief in the afterlife). Once again, the speaker hears a sound that calls them towards death, this time the "evening bell." The gentle /l/ consonance shared between "Twilight" and "bell" brings this mention of sound to life, chiming deliberately as though the /l/ itself has been rung like a bell.

The exclamation mark at the end of line 10 suggests that there is even an element of excited anticipation for the speaker as they confront their imminent death. As revealed in the following stanza, this is because they expect to meet their maker (the "Pilot"). The polysyndeton of the repeated "And" recalls the same technique used in the first stanza, creating a sense of symmetry and design that subtly suggests the ultimate designer: God.

It's in lines 11 and 12 that the speaker makes clear the way that they want their own death to be received. Because of their personal assurance about God and the afterlife, they do not see death as something to be feared. Accordingly, they do not even feel death to be worthy of the "sadness of farewell"—they wish to transmit their faith and trust in God to those around them, so that no one perceives the speaker's death as the end of the speaker's existence.

Finally, the semicolon that ends this stanza sets up the poem's conclusion, and it's in the final stanza that the poem's tone, metaphor, and atmosphere begin to make sense. It's worth noting, too, that "embark" is a verb usually associated with travel by sea (which is the speaker's chosen metaphor to describe their death).

LINES 13-16

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crost the bar.

In this final stanza, the speaker reveals why they have such a calm and accepting attitude towards their own death. They explain that they expect to meet their "Pilot," by which they mean God (the use of "Pilot" supports the metaphor of a voyage at sea). The speaker admits that death is intimidating in the sense that it represents something utterly different than the specific "Time and Place[s]" in which an individual lives their earthly life.

The word "Bourne" means a kind of physical limit, suggesting that "Time and Place" ultimately limit the soul. Death thus returns the soul to a more purely spiritual existence. (As lines 7 and 8 suggested, death is a *return* because it brings the soul to the state it was in *before* birth, its original "home" with God.) The phrase length is important here, extending over the first two lines of the stanza through enjambment. This means that the full phrase—"For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place / The flood may bear me far,"—travels a long distance from start to finish, evoking the speaker's description of what the "flood" will do.

The final couplet repeats the use of enjambment, resulting in a similarly long phrase length. It's here that the speaker states clearly the reason *why* they have an almost excited anticipation of death. The speaker believes that once they have crossed the metaphorical "bar" they will see their "Pilot face to face"—in other words, they will know God. Because death heralds the return to an eternal afterlife, it is characterized here as a kind of homecoming, one which makes knowing God achievable in a way that wasn't possible during earthly life.

The word "Pilot" refers to someone who is control of a ship.

Here, God becomes the metaphorical pilot of the speaker's life, which in turn suggests that everything about both life and death follows a design which is preordained by God. In other words, God has plotted out the course of the speaker's life—and, accordingly, death comes when it is *supposed* to, no sooner and no later. Crossing the bar, then, represents the transition from life to the afterlife, which in the speaker's view is no cause for alarm at all.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used sparingly but deliberately throughout "Crossing the Bar." One of the first instances occurs in the second line, when the speaker describes hearing a "clear call" (a "call" which signals it's the speaker's time to die). The two /c/ sounds in quick succession is intentionally obvious, drawing the reader's attention to the poem's use of sound patterning to reinforce its meaning. The /c/ sounds ring loud and clear—just like the "call" the speaker describes hearing.

In the following line, "may" and "moaning" alliterate. Here, the poem is starting to build its case for a quiet acceptance of death. As part of this, the poem describes death as a kind of transition represented metaphorically by crossing the sand bar from a coastal area into a wider body of water, like a sea or an ocean. The speaker wants to pass into death quietly (because it isn't something to fear), and accordingly—within the metaphor they've constructed—they wish for the sand to remain undisturbed as they cross. The two /m/ sounds here are suggestive of careful, quiet, but deliberate movement.

In line 5, the two alliterative /f/ sounds create a sense of fullness, as though the line itself is brimming with that particular sound. This /f/ sound is then developed in the final stanza, *increasing* the sense of fullness to suggest the increasing nearness of the speaker's death.

> For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place
> The flood may bear me far,
> I hope to see my Pilot face to face
> When I have crost the bar.

In general, the poem's spare and exact use of alliteration allows it to draw attention to important moments and heighten these moments' effects.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "S," "s"
- **Line 2:** "c," "c"
- **Line 3:** "m," "m"
- **Line 6:** "f," "f"
- **Line 7:** "W," "w"
- **Line 10:** "A," "a"
- **Line 13:** "F," "f," "ou," "ou"
- **Line 14:** "f," "f"
- **Line 15:** "f," "f"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used quite sparingly in "Crossing the Bar."

It is employed in line 3 with the two /o/ sounds of "no moaning." The assonance has a gentle quality to it that helps suggest delicate but deliberate movement. The /o/ sound also evokes the sound of moaning itself.

Then, in line 5, the long /ee/ sounds of "seems asleep" exert a kind of pull on the sound of the line that evokes the pull of tides. This picks up on line 2's long /ee/ sounds in "clear call for me," and is then echoed in line 7's rhymed word, "deep." Line 7 also has an assonant /ou/ sound shared between "out" and "boundless." This long vowel sound has a hypnotic quality, working well with the stanza's discussion of sleep and slow-moving water.

In the fourth stanza, the repeated /a/ sound in "And after that the dark!" helps emphasize the dramatic nature of this phrase, in which the speaker recognizes how soon death will come.

The final stanza continues to use assonance to dramatic effect. For instance, line 13's alliterating phrase, "from out our bourne," uses the double /ou/ sound the emphasize the powerful exiting motion it describes: the speaker is leaving this world. Similarly, "face to face" in line 15 captures the dramatic moment when the speaker will finally meet God, and the journey from Earth to Heaven will be complete.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "ea," "e"
- **Line 3:** "o," "o"
- **Line 5:** "ee," "ee"
- **Line 7:** "ou," "ou"
- **Line 10:** "A," "a," "a"
- **Line 13:** "ou," "ou"
- **Line 15:** "a," "a"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used between lines 7 and 8, 13 and 14, and 15 and 16. Overall, this use of enjambment is part of the poems' habit of varying phrase lengths across different lines, which in turn evokes the sound of waves.

The enjambment after "deep" in line 7 allows for the word to linger in the depth of the white space that follows, while also allowing for the start of line 8 to provide an active verb in the form of "Turns." This active verb suggest that death is a positive,

homeward journey. It's a moment of subtle but noticeable drama. Furthermore, this enjambment highlights the difference in line lengths between lines 7 and 8. Whereas line 7 is 10 syllables long, emphasizing how long and arduous life on Earth is, line 8 is only 4 syllables long, showing how quick and relieving death might be.

The enjambment between lines 13 and 14 has a similar effect to the one above, also helping create a sense of depth—both through the white space of the page and the way in which it extends the phrase across two lines. Here, the length of the line evokes the boundless eternity (beyond "bourne of Time and Place") that seems to await the speaker after death.

The enjambment between lines 15 and 16 continues to evoke depth. Now, however, this depth is the eternal afterlife as opposed to the short time of earthly lives. Furthermore, the joining of lines 15 and 16 through enjambment mimics the way in which the speaker expects to be joined with God after death.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "deep"
- **Line 8:** " Turns"
- **Line 13:** "Place"
- **Line 14:** " The"
- **Line 15:** "face"
- **Line 16:** " When"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

Put simply, the entire poem is an extended metaphor in which dying is compared to crossing over a sandbar into the ocean.

The speaker considers their own death, and shows no fear because of their deep-rooted belief that dying will bring about a meeting with God in the afterlife. Accordingly, the speaker doesn't feel like death is something to be feared. This is where the metaphor comes in. As part of the speaker's expression of their philosophy towards death, dying is characterized as a kind of transition metaphorically expressed as "crossing the bar."

This, of course, is not a reference to drinking establishments, but to the sand bar that divides a coastal area from the sea or the ocean. In this metaphor, the coastal area is earthly life, and the great body of water that awaits those who cross the bar represents the mysterious realm of the afterlife.

The speaker is fairly confident that God awaits them after dying. Accordingly, as part of the poem's metaphor, the speaker presents the way that they wish to die (and how people should respond to this death too). Because of the speaker's assurances about the afterlife, the speaker feels that they want to die calmly and quietly, without fear or resistance. The speaker expresses this metaphorically as crossing the bar in a way that doesn't disturb it—because there is no reason for death to be disturbing.

Doubling down on this sea voyage-based metaphor, God is referred to not as "God" but as the speaker's "Pilot." Thus, the poem as a whole follows an extended metaphor in which a gentle voyage out to sea, with God as the pilot, represents death.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

PERSONIFICATION

Personification is used subtly in "Crossing the Bar." In line 3, the speaker wishes for there to be "no moaning of the bar." This is a metaphor related to how the speaker wishes to die—calmly and without resistance—which sees death as something that need not be disturbing. "Moaning" here relates to the sand bar remaining untroubled by the speaker's transition from life to death—in other words, the speaker wants a death that is barely noticeable. The sand bar, like a calm person, remains untroubled by the speaker's transition from life to death.

The use of "moaning" here also refers to the sound made by people who are in pain or complaining. This seems to deliberately suggest the noises people might make when dying, especially if they are in fear of what is to come. The speaker is expressly arguing against this kind of approach to death—or at least saying it isn't relevant to the speaker specifically. That's because the thought of the "Pilot" (God) comforts the speaker, meaning that they wish to literally and figuratively go quietly.

Personification is also used in line 5, in which the tide is described as moving as if "asleep." Again, this brings the poem's central metaphor in line with the speaker's beliefs about how to approach death. The tide, like a person who is totally at peace, accepts death as a kind of sleep.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "And may there be no moaning of the bar,"
- **Line 5:** " But such a tide as moving seems asleep,"

POLYSYNDETON

Polysyndeton is used twice in the poem, and appears in the first and third stanzas.

On a technical level, the repeated "And" in lines 2 and 3 helps maintain the meter, allowing the poem's iambic metrical form to stay intact. But there's more to the use of polysyndeton than metrical convenience. The word "and" is a conjunction, linking different sections of a sentence together like the various stages of a journey. The speaker, of course, is about to "embark" on their own journey. The use of "and" therefore helps build the poem's sense of momentum, gently propelling the poem forward to its conclusion. This gentleness of movement is exactly the way that the speaker metaphorically characterizes

their own hoped-for death.

Another subtle aspect of the polysyndeton is the way in which it relates to the poem's religious context. The King James Version Bible—a version popular in Tennyson's time as well as today—is full of polysyndeton. A typical example of polysyndeton in the Bible can be found in the description of the floods during Noah's time:

> And every living substance was destroyed which was upon the face of the ground, both man, and cattle, and the creeping things, and the fowl of the heaven; and they were destroyed from the earth: and Noah only remained *alive*, and they that *were* with him in the ark. (Genesis 7:23)

The "ands" create a stately and quietly authoritative effect in the King James Bible, and that is certainly part of the atmosphere of Tennyson's poem.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “ And”
- **Line 3:** “And”
- **Line 10:** “ And”
- **Line 11:** “And”

SIBILANCE

"Crossing the Bar" contains gently sibilant sounds throughout its four stanzas. However, there are a few lines in which the effects of sibilance are particularly significant.

The first of these is in line 1:

> Sunset and evening star

This line has a hushed and whispery quality that helps create the atmosphere of something coming to an end (as referenced by the line's imagery of the ending day). It's as though the poem is a kind of deeply personal prayer, and the sibilance here helps establish that tone.

The most noticeable sibilance by far comes in the second stanza. Here, the speaker uses metaphor to elaborate on the way they want to die. The speaker wants to "cross the bar"—to die—in a similarly quiet way to a "tide" that "as moving seems asleep." These /s/ sounds have two key effects. Firstly, they evoke the sound of gentle water, like waves quietly breaking on the shore. But the line also mentions sleep, and the sibilance helps evoke this too. The /s/ sounds have a breath-like quality that calls to mind the sound of someone sleeping or in a trance-like state.

The final key example of sibilance is in lines 15 and 16:

> I hope to see my Pilot face to face
> When I have crost the bar.

Having already established the link between sibilance, quietness and water, the same sound here makes the poem's close gentle and tender—characteristics that the speaker also expects of death.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “S,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 5:** “s,” “s,” “s,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 6:** “s”
- **Line 7:** “ss”
- **Line 8:** “s”
- **Line 11:** “s,” “ss”
- **Line 15:** “s,” “c,” “c”
- **Line 16:** “s”

VOCABULARY

Moaning (Line 3) - *Moaning* here means a noise of disturbance, as when someone moans in pain. Here, the speaker's saying the sandbar won't make any noise as they pass over it. The word also plays on the meaning of "complaining"—which the speaker is arguing *against* when it comes to their own death.

Bar (Line 3) - "Bar" here refers to a sandbar. This is a ridge of submerged sand that marks the transition between a coastal area and the wider sea or ocean. In the speaker's metaphor, the bar equates with the actual act of dying—with life (the coast) on one side, and death (the sea) on the other

Put out (Line 4) - This simply refers to the moment that the speaker, metaphorically speaking, sets sail on the sea. Of course, they are referring to dying.

Boundless (Line 7) - *Boundless* here means without limit. The speaker is referring to the vastness of the ocean (the "deep"), which in turn relates metaphorically to eternity—specifically that which comes before and after life.

Embark (Line 12) - To *embark* is to leave on a journey. It has specific connotations of maritime travel, thus fitting with the poem's main metaphor—that dying is like crossing the sandbar into the ocean.

Tho' (Line 13) - This is an old-fashioned contraction of the word *though*.

Bourne (Line 13) - This relates to a limit or boundary. The speaker is referring to the physical and time-related restrictions of earthly life, as opposed to the eternity of the afterlife.

Pilot (Line 15) - As in the *pilot* of a ship, who steers it. This refers metaphorically to God, picking up on the poem's travel-based metaphor.

Crost (Line 16) - This is an archaic spelling of the word "crossed."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Crossing the Bar" consists of four quatrains with a regular rhyme scheme. The poem additionally follows a form in which the speaker hears a "call" from nature and then meditates on the meaning of that call. This happens twice, first in stanzas 1 and 2, and then in stanzas 3 and 4, giving the poem a somewhat symmetrical structure.

Both the first and thirds stanzas begin with the speaker taking note of their surroundings, and hearing the "call" that signals that their death is near:

> Sunset and evening star,
> And one clear call for me!
>
> Twilight and evening bell,
> And after that the dark!

The rest of the stanzas provide the speaker with an opportunity to reflect on the *meaning* of this call—in other words, to consider their own death and what it means to die. Lines 3-8 and 11-16 thus contain the speaker's reflections, and show the way that the speaker feels that dying quietly—without "moaning"—is the appropriate way to die. This is because the speaker is comforted by the idea of the afterlife and that God has a plan for them. Indeed, dying presents an opportunity for reunion with God.

METER

"Crossing the Bar" is a mostly iambic poem with varying line lengths. The general steadiness of the iambs makes the poem feel assured and, to an extent, somber—as though the poem is an elegy written in advance of the speaker's own death. The assuredness is important because it reflects the fact the speaker isn't afraid of death—rather, they are comforted by the thought of dying because it means they will "see [their] Pilot face to face," meaning God.

The variation of the line length serves an important function too. The longest lines, such as line 3, are iambic pentameter:

> And may | there be | no moan|-ing of |the bar

The shortest has just two stresses:

> When I | embark

This variation in line length—without sacrificing the steadiness of the meter—gives the poem an undulating, wave-like quality, as though the poem itself is mimicking the quiet pull of the tides that it describes.

Though the poem is reliably iambic throughout, there are a couple of key moments of metrical variation that contribute to the poem's power. In line 8, for example, the line replaces its first iamb with a trochee and its second with a spondee, creating a highly stressed phrase:

> Turns a- | gain home.

The sudden placement of the stress at the start of the line represents a metrical turn, which matches the idea of turning towards home that the poem describes. Furthermore, the loading of stresses into such a short line gives the line a kind of grounded sound, perhaps conveying a ship coming to rest on shore.

RHYME SCHEME

"Crossing the Bar" has a highly regular rhyme scheme, following an ABAB pattern in each of its four stanzas. This regularity gives the poem a calming and assured tone, reflecting the speaker's perspective that death is not something to be feared. The consistency of the rhymes also conveys the inevitability of the tides going in and out. This is an especially useful effect given that the lines vary so much in length—the rhymes help keep the poem stable and mark out the transition from one line to the next.

It's also worth noting that the poem ends on the same rhyme word and rhyme sound with which it begins ("star" and "bar" in stanza 1, and "far" and "bar" in stanza 4). Considering that the poem presents death not as something to fear but as a kind of homecoming and reunion with God, this neat closure marks a similar sense of return in the rhyme scheme to match.

SPEAKER

The speaker in "Crossing the Bar" is non-specific. While many people assume that the speaker is Tennyson himself, the speaker in the poem has no distinguishing features and could be anyone, man or woman.

The poem is spoken from a first person perspective without the intervention of any other voices. As the poem progresses, it becomes clear that the speaker expects to die soon. In fact, they have heard the "clear call for me!" Throughout the poem, the speaker expresses their attitude and philosophy towards their own impending death. Rather than seeing death as something to fear, the speaker actually looks on death with a quiet eagerness that takes a belief in God as its inspiration. In other words, the thought that there is a design to life and death—that both are part of God's plan—comforts the speaker. Indeed, death to the speaker is actually not an ending but a kind

of homecoming in which people are reunited with their "Pilot" (God).

SETTING

"Crossing the Bar" is set within the tight-knit imaginative world of its main extended metaphor. The speaker characterizes dying as "Crossing the Bar"—with "bar" referring to a sandbar that divides a coastal area from the wider sea or ocean. Accordingly, the entire poem maintains this water- and shore-based setting. The poem is firmly grounded in time as well as space, with the opening line and line 9 referring to "Sunset" and "Twilight." In other words, night is coming on—and night is also part of the poem's metaphor for death. It is in this metaphorical night that the speaker must set sail (die) and return to the ocean (eternity), where the speaker can meet their "Pilot" (God) once again.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) was a British poet during the Victorian era. Tennyson served as the country's Poet Laureate—the official poet of the state—and to this day is still the longest-serving holder of the post. Indeed, he was one of the most popular poets of his day, and continues to be popular in modern times. His upbringing, however, was rather difficult. His father was an alcoholic, and his siblings also struggled with addiction problems and mental health issues. Other significant poets of the era include Matthew Arnold, Robert and Elizabeth Browning, and Thomas Hardy.

Death is not an uncommon subject in Tennyson's poetry—*In Memoriam* (completed in 1849), perhaps Tennyson's most famous work, was written to mark the passing of his friend and fellow poet Arthur Henry Hallam. "Crossing the Bar" is widely understood to be Tennyson's reflections on his own death, and was written close to the end of his life when he was battling with ill health. Evidently, he felt the poem to be a kind of final statement, instructing that the poem should end all future collections of his works.

The poem makes for an interesting comparison with another famous poem of the era, Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach." Both are set in coastal environments, and both consider endings of sorts. But whereas Arnold's poem expresses doubt and anxiety about the loss of religion—particularly in view of the scientific advances of the day—Tennyson's poem finds sure-footed comfort in the belief that there is a Christian afterlife.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Tennyson is a poet firmly rooted in the *Victorian era*, a term that describes the rule of Queen Victoria over Britain and its Empire from 1837 to 1901. It was a time of seismic change, particularly inspired by advances in scientific understanding. It was during this time that Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species* (1859), which cast doubt on the religious certainties of previous eras. Charles Lyell, a prominent geologist, made major contributions to society's understanding of time and humanity's relationship to the lifespan of the Earth (similarly undermining the literal narratives of the Bible). That said, it was still a deeply religious time. Church-going was an activity woven into the fabric of day-to-day life, and the notoriously strict Victorian sense of morality was deeply embedded in religious tradition.

The Victorian era also saw significant advances in technology, which in part helped facilitate Britain's extended reach around the world through colonization. Trains became a prominent mode of travel, and increasing industrialization contributed to higher population density in cities like London and Manchester. As the Poet Laureate of the time, Tennyson is generally thought of as the quintessential poet of the era, his highly formal writing representing the strictures and organization of the Victorian period.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Reading of the Poem — "Crossing the Bar" read by British actor Jasper Britton. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=92_r2JyP4YM)
- A Musical Setting — A choral performance of the poem in England's Ely Cathedral. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFeYhScbZto)
- Dover Beach by Matthew Arnold — A poem by a contemporary of Tennyson's, Matthew Arnold. Also based in a coastal setting, it makes for an interesting comparison. (https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/matthew-arnold/dover-beach)
- Further Poems and Bio — More poems by Tennyson, and an in-depth biographical discussion. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/alfred-tennyson)
- A Radio Documentary — A BBC documentary that focuses on Tennyson's most famous poem, "In Memoriam." (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0124pnq)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ALFRED LORD TENNYSON POEMS

- Tears, Idle Tears
- The Brook
- The Charge of the Light Brigade
- Ulysses

HOW TO CITE

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