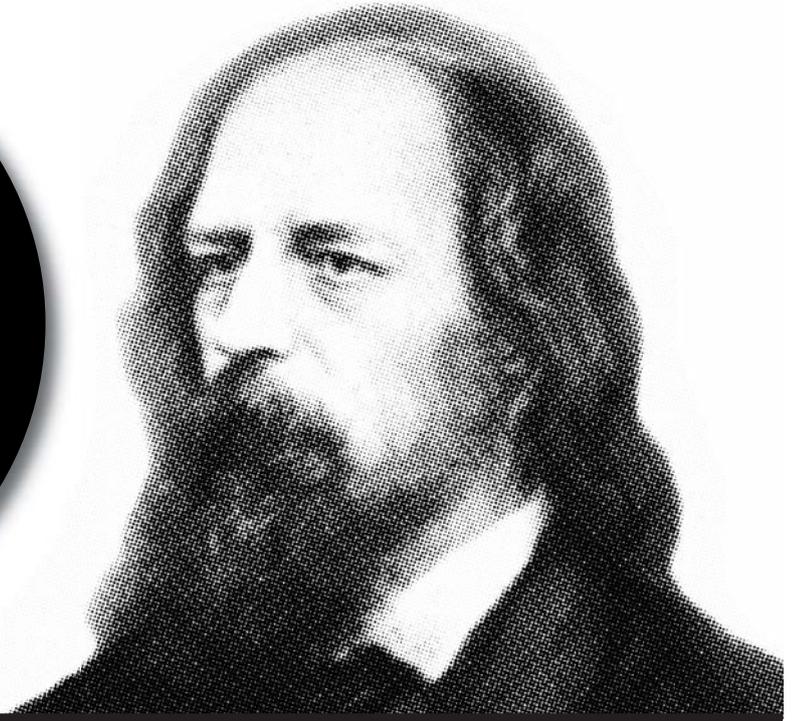


Page Fright

Connecting historical poems with contemporary spoken word: a resource for students from **The Poetry Society**



*Hollie McNish and
Alfred Lord Tennyson*



Hollie McNish & Alfred Lord Tennyson

This resource looks at the work of two poets, Hollie McNish and Alfred, Lord Tennyson. It is designed to support the filmed performances available at poetrysociety.org.uk/pagefright

Before you try the activities here, watch the films and explore the information provided alongside them. By exploring the Page Fright webpages you will see how contemporary spoken word artists continue to be inspired by historical writers and how the same themes can prompt very different responses and very different poems.

Hollie McNish is a spoken word artist and former UK slam champion who has released a number of poetry books and spoken word albums. **Alfred, Lord Tennyson** was writing through the middle of the nineteenth century. He was appointed as Poet Laureate in 1850, succeeding William Wordsworth. Both poems explored here focus on current affairs, and were written in response to events unfolding in the media at the time.

These exercises will help you explore poetic techniques and will guide you through writing your own poems inspired by the themes, form and style of McNish and Tennyson.

Immigration

Hollie's poem 'British National Breakfast' deals with the fear of immigration in Britain, set against our dependence on other nations for maintaining a 'British' lifestyle. Concerns about immigration are something that is much discussed in the media.

Using the example of a couple having breakfast, McNish shows how international trade means that we are dependent on many other countries for many foods and goods. She uses this to mock the couple's anti-immigration views.



Breakfast: where does yours come from?

Have a go

Your challenge is to write a poem or spoken word piece that looks at how part of your life is influenced by another culture. Perhaps you have family connections to another culture which inform your life, or maybe you listen to lots of American music, or watch Bollywood films.

First, make a list of all the things that influence you. It might be particular objects, foods, certain songs or particular people. Are there words or phrases from other languages that you use all the time? List as many as you can.

Now think about how each of these things compares with a stereotypically "British" equivalent, and list as many comparisons as you can. How do they compare? How does each of these things make you feel?

Use these ideas like McNish does to turn these two lists into a poem describing an event where these two cultures collide. Perhaps, like her poem, it's at a mealtime. Or maybe it's a meeting of two people with different backgrounds. Describe the scenario.

Like McNish, you might want to use the poem to explore attitudes to other cultures and backgrounds.

Imagery

Tennyson wrote 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' in 1854 whilst he was Poet Laureate. The poem is about an incident (bit.ly/1hWwbxA) during the Crimean War where a miscommunication led to a large number of British casualties.

One of the reasons the poem is so powerful and has endured for so long is because of the haunting central image of the "valley of death" the soldiers ride into. This strong biblical imagery recalls the "valley of the shadow of death" (Psalm 23:4).

Have a go

Your challenge is to write an eight-line poem or spoken word piece about war that uses one powerful visual image at its centre.

First, pick an image to build your poem around. Think about what you want to explore about war and what image fits with that idea. You could use an animal, a person, a musical instrument, a food, a plant – anything you like.

Once you have decided on your central image, generate as many different ideas as you can about your image.

For example, if you are using an animal, think about how it moves, what it eats, where it lives and how it behaves. All the time, think about how this links back to war.

Now write a line for each of these ideas. This could be a full sequence, just an image or piece of description. Once you have a set of lines, edit them down and move the order around until you are happy with your poem. You could use 'War is a...' as a starting line or as a refrain which repeats throughout to help you structure your poem.



The Relief of the Light Brigade by Richard Caton Woodville, 1854.

Rhythm

Both McNish and Tennyson make strong use of rhythm within their work. It is used to particular effect in 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' where the powerful rhythm mimics horses' hooves racing into battle.

Before starting this exercise, go back and watch the films of each poem. Think about how each poet creates a strong rhythm. Think about the stressed and unstressed syllables in the lines (called the 'metre'), and also about repetition and rhyme.

Have a go

Your challenge is to write a poem or a spoken word piece with a strong rhythm or beat. First, think of a theme which has a clear beat associated with it. This could be marching, running, dancing, a machine, a train, chanting at a football match, anything you can think of. Be as imaginative as you can.

Once you have chosen your theme think about the type of rhythm associated with it. Is it fast or slow? Does it stay the same pace all the way through or speed up? How will you convey this rhythm in your poem? What language will you use to support the rhythm?

Write an eight-line poem or spoken word piece about the theme, using rhyme, repetition and metre to create a strong beat or rhythm that supports the words.

As you write, keep speaking the words out loud so you can hear the beat developing.

For inspiration and ideas for how to do this, try reading or listening to the following:

- 'From a Railway Carriage' by Robert Louis Stevenson (bit.ly/1JwEr1G)
- 'The Dance' by William Carlos Williams (bit.ly/1JVb3US)
- 'Night Mail' by W. H. Auden (bit.ly/1U482GF)

Persuasive writing

Tennyson's poem 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' was inspired by a miscommunication during the Battle of Balaclava, in the Crimean War, which led to the death of many British soldiers. Tennyson read about it in *The Times* newspaper and wrote his poem shortly after (bit.ly/1hWwbxA). It was published just six weeks later in another newspaper, and become very well known, possibly more so than the battle that killed the men, or the reasons behind their deaths.

Have a go

Your challenge is to write a poem or spoken word piece in direct response to an issue. First, flick through a newspaper just reading the headlines. Stop when you find one that provokes a strong response for you. To try and capture your initial response, don't read the article – but begin to write based on your initial emotional response to the headline.

Give yourself five minutes to write all your thoughts out based just on the headline. It might come out like a poem, but it may not.

Now read the article and use the details of the article to inform your writing, adding to what you already have. It may be that you argue against the newspaper's position, or it may be that you can use parts of it to strengthen your argument.

Shape your writing into a short poem. Are there lines that could be removed to make the poem more concise? Do you need to add a line to make the poem clearer?

As you are editing, think about the imagery in the poem. Is there a metaphor that would work better? Is there a central image that could be developed? Give yourself at least fifteen minutes to edit.

When you feel you've finished your poem take a moment to reflect on how your thoughts on the subject changed during this process. Did finding out more about the subject make the issue clearer or more complex? Did you find it easier or harder to make persuasive points?

Create your own Page Fright film

We hope these writing exercises have allowed you to think about McNish and Tennyson's poems and to explore your own responses to the themes, forms and techniques they contain.

You can continue to edit and develop your response poems, or write a new poem in response to other themes these pieces have inspired you to think about.

Once you are happy with a poem, then you can have a go at creating your own Page Fright film at poetrysociety.org.uk/my-page-fright