

Crossing the Bar — Lord Alfred Tennyson

Crossing the Bar, an **elegy** written by the British poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson, is a poem focusing on the transience of life and the finality of death. Lord Tennyson was a poet of the Victorian period and remained the poet laureate of Great Britain and Ireland during his lifetime. He is well celebrated to this day for his short lyrics.

‘Crossing the bar’ was written in 1889 when the poet was visiting the Isle of Wight and published in a volume *Demeter and Other Poems* (1889). He was eighty years old at the time and was down with a severe illness, from which he eventually recovered. The illness, however, made the poet ponder on Death as he himself was very old and nearing his time. He uses the **metaphor** of crossing a sand bar to represent death in this poem. He died three years later, and although he wrote a few more poems, he **requested that all of his poetry volumes be ended with this poem**. Thus, the poem is an important one and can be seen as Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s choice of his final words. The poem consists of four stanzas, and each of them are **quatrains**. The poet uses the classical rhyme scheme of abab. The structure of the poem is akin to that of a ballad verse but it falls short of the metre. There is no apparent metre to the poem. The length of the lines is a feature of interest in the poem. The poet varies the length of the lines between ten, six, and four syllables per line randomly throughout the poem. The entire poem is connected, both in theme and conceit. The stanzas do not stand individually on their own. They are tightly knit and carry the meaning forward to the next ones.

The poem begins with the speaker describing the atmosphere. He says it is sunset and the evening star can be seen in the sky. Someone is calling the speaker. It is a clear, unmistakable call. It is the call of death. The speaker believes that his death is close. It is interesting to note here the imagery the poet presents before us at the start of the poem. ‘Sunset’ and ‘Evening star’ represent the end of the day. Just as the day is about to end, the speaker says that his life is drawing to an end as well. Here the poet uses his famous metaphor of ‘Crossing the bar’, describing death as an act of passing beyond life. The word ‘bar’ here means a sandbar. A sandbar is a geographical structure which forms around the mouth of a river, or extends from a ‘Spit’ by slow deposition of sediments carried by the current over millions of years. The structure forms a kind of barrier between the water inside (the river water) and outside it (the open sea). The poet uses this sandbar as a symbol of death, with the water inside representing his life, and the water beyond representing the afterlife. He wants to ‘put out to sea’ without the ‘moaning of the bar’. The poet wishes his death to be without pain and without mourning. Through the poem, the poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson compares his impending death to crossing a bar. In the stanza, the speaker of the poem talks about the inevitability of death.

The poet wishes that when he ‘put(s) out to sea’, that is when he dies, let it be like a ride which seems asleep as it moves. The speaker wants his death to be smooth. Like a calm sea wave, which is ‘too full for sound and foam’ the speaker hopes that his death will be silent, smooth and quick, making no fuss. In the subsequent lines, the poet uses the example of the river and the sea to express the kind of death he wishes for himself. The water from the sea evaporates and turns into clouds; these clouds bring rain, entering that water into the river, and these rivers too flow, carrying their water and eventually pouring it into the sea. They, thus complete a cycle, and the

water returns from where it came. Just so, the speaker, considering himself like the water, says that he is returning where he came from. 'The boundless deep' here apparently stands for the sea, and in an allegorical sense to the place the poet believes he will go to after his death.

Here, we should notice that this stanza is a strict continuation of the idea introduced in the first stanza. The last lines of the first stanza together with this one makes up the meaning of the verse. In the third stanza, the poet again resorts to describing the atmosphere to convey his inner feelings. It was sunset when the speaker started the poem, but now it is twilight. The sun has already gone down the horizon and dusk is settling. The speaker can hear the evening bell tolling. It is the indication that night is approaching. Then after a while it gets dark. It is night. The poet here uses twilight to show us the state of his life. Just as the day has ended, his life too is about to end. Here twilight stands for sadness, darkness and grief portray the speaker's miserable state before his death. The speaker expresses his hope that there will be no 'sadness of farewell' upon his death. The 'sadness of farewell' is ambiguous and can mean both the speaker's own sadness as he departs from life, or the sadness of the people whom he leaves behind and who are saying farewell to him. However, we think, the former is more relevant. Again, Lord Tennyson writes 'When I embark' to convey the idea of the speaker's death. Thus, it is evident from the word 'embark' that death is not seen as a final destination by the poet, but rather as a new beginning. In the previous stanza of the poem, we see the speaker's positive attitude towards death. It is seen to be exemplified in this final stanza of the poem. We understand that the speaker has accepted his reality – inevitability of death. He appears to have made his peace with the idea of his fast approaching death.

He says that he will be beyond the boundaries of time and place and the flood of death will carry him far away. This is going beyond the reach of this world. The speaker suggests that there is a place beyond our time and space where he hopes to go after his death. We are, thus, acquainted with the poet's belief in afterlife. These final lines of the poem are shrouded in allusions and hidden meanings. Firstly, we are told that the speaker hopes to see his pilot face to face when he will have crossed the bar. Here, the word pilot is a direct reference to God. Lord Tennyson had peculiar views on religion. On one hand, he disapproved of Christianity, while on the other, we see wide use of religious things and ideas in his works. Since God is considered to drive the world and all living things, we see the pilot reference of the divine world in the poem. Also, the use of the word 'crost' is interesting. While it might simply be a word to suggest 'Crossing' the bar, it is speculated that it might be a reference to Christ, as crost is similar in sound to both Christ and Cross. If so, then we find another allusion from the poet to religion and afterlife.

The poem thus ends on a positive note with the poet both accepting the finality of death and hoping to meet God in the afterlife.
