

*Crossing the Bar"*

*By Tennyson*

*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 though 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 crossed the bar.*

## **Summary**

The speaker heralds the setting of the sun and the rise of the evening star, and hears that he is being called. He hopes that the ocean will not make the mournful sound of waves beating against a sand bar when he sets out to sea. Rather, he wishes for a tide that is so full that it cannot contain sound or foam and therefore seems asleep when all that has been carried from the boundless depths of the ocean returns back out to the depths.

The speaker announces the close of the day and the evening bell, which will be followed by darkness. He hopes that no one will cry when he departs, because although he may be carried beyond the limits of time and space as we know them, he retains the hope that he will look upon the face of his "Pilot" when he has crossed the sand bar.

## Form

This poem consists of four quatrain stanzas rhyming *ABAB*. The first and third lines of each stanza are always a couple of beats longer than the second and fourth lines, although the line lengths vary among the stanzas.

## Commentary

Tennyson wrote “Crossing the Bar” in 1889, three years before he died. The poem describes his placid and accepting attitude toward death. Although he followed this work with subsequent poems, he requested that “Crossing the Bar” appear as the final poem in all collections of his work.

Tennyson uses the metaphor of a sand bar to describe the barrier between life and death. A sandbar is a ridge of sand built up by currents along a shore. In order to reach the shore, the waves must crash against the sandbar, creating a sound that Tennyson describes as the “moaning of the bar.” The bar is one of several images of liminality in Tennyson’s poetry: in “Ulysses,” the hero desires “to sail beyond the sunset”; in “Tithonus”, the main character finds himself at the “quiet limit of the world,” and regrets that he has asked to “pass beyond the goal of ordinance.”

The other important image in the poem is one of “crossing,” suggesting Christian connotations: “crossing” refers both to “crossing over” into the next world, and to the act of “crossing” oneself in the classic Catholic gesture of religious faith and devotion. The religious significance of crossing was clearly familiar to Tennyson, for in an earlier poem of his, the knights and lords of Camelot “crossed themselves for fear” when they saw the Lady of Shalott lying dead in her boat. The cross was also where Jesus died; now as Tennyson himself dies, he evokes the image again. So, too, does he hope to complement this metaphorical link with a spiritual one: he hopes that he will “see [his] Pilot face to face.”

"Crossing the Bar" focuses on the necessity of confronting life's ups and downs with stoicism and manly honor.

This manly honor was perhaps *the* central component of gentlemanly virtue in the Victorian and Edwardian periods. The British believed the hallmark of a true gentleman was his ability to regard life almost as a game, and to accept its ups and downs in the spirit of "fair play." Indeed, a lot of scholars, like Paul Fussell (*The Great War and Modern Memory*), have analyzed how this deeply ingrained collective understanding of honor affected the behavior of British soldiers in World War I.

Tennyson's central image in the poem is that of a ship setting out into the ocean. To reach the ocean, it will have to cross a sandbar. Crossing the sandbar is a metaphor for death, because death, like the ocean, is a great unknown.

In the first stanza, the narrator realizes that night—which represents the end of his life—is approaching. Instead of complaining that night has come too soon, or complaining about the unfairness of it all, he simply accepts the evening star as "one clear call for me." Furthermore, he hopes that when his ship sets out toward its final destination, it does not do so when one can hear the "moaning of the bar."

As we see in the second stanza, the narrator hopes for a tide "too full for sound or foam" to take him toward the great crossing. (If you are a fantasy literature fan, you might notice some parallels with the way Tolkien talks about death.)