

Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar"

1. Although this short lyric was not the last poem that Tennyson wrote, he made it a condition that this lyric is to be placed at the end of the edition of his poems. Probably, it is a befitting farewell cry that looks forward to the poet's death. It also pins point Tennyson's final mood and frame of mind at that final moment of his life.
2. Tennyson structures his poem around extended sea imagery by presenting his own death call as a call for a sea voyage:
 - A. In the 1st stanza 'sunset' and 'evening star' stands for old age and end of life (as day). The call to sea voyage is death call. He accepts this call with high resignation as he hopes that there would be no mourning for his departure/death. The "bar" is death as a transition from this life to the afterlife.
 - B. In the 2nd stanza presents the nature of the tide which shall move the ship on its voyge. tHe tide direction is home ward as the last line in the stanza states. This means that death for the poet is both a voyage and home coming. The soul goes back to its original home which is God.
 - C. The 3rd stanza is a variation on the 1st one. "twilight and evening bell" herald again the poet's old age and impending end of life. The words 'dark' in the second line emphasizes night as old age and death. Once more, the poet hopes that his death would not cause sadness to his people. This is an emphasis of resignation and calm acceptance of his death.
 - D. The 4th and last stanza turns the voyage into death. Now the poet speaks about death as voyage from human existence which is governed by "Time and Place". The tide shall carry his soul to the ship of death which awaits for him after the bar/death. The last two lines are problematic. While these two lines allude to the Bible, specifically to 1 John 3:2 and I Corinthians 12:12, they carry a deep not of doubt. The speaker says "I hope to see my Pilot face to face" after death (i.e., after crossing the bar). This means that he is not sure that God exists. Thus he wants to make sure by meeting God "face to face".

3. This note of doubt at the end of the poem can be rationalized in the context of the conflict between religious faith and doubt in an age in which, increasingly, the findings of science were calling into question Christianity's traditional assumptions about man's special place in the universe and his special relationship with his Creator. This is how "Crossing the Bar" reflects this late nineteenth-century philosophical and scientific conflict.