



***READING AND WRITING SKILLS FOR STUDENTS OF
LITERATURE IN ENGLISH: THE VICTORIAN PERIOD***

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3.3. Alfred Tennyson, “Crossing the Bar” (1889)

Reading Skills

I

The poem clearly has a symbolic significance. The following questions are about the poem’s literal, or surface, meaning. NOT its possible symbolic meaning(s).

1. What different meanings does the word “bar” have? What does it refer to in the poem?
2. How is a bar (of the kind meant in the poem) formed? Find out what longshore drift is.
3. Where is the poem set? What does the bar do? Can it be crossed at any time? Find out how tides affect access to harbours.
4. Does the act of ‘crossing the bar’ in the poem imply a move away from the land and towards the sea, or away from the sea and towards the land?
5. Is the narrator (or I persona) happy to be crossing the bar? Who is guiding him? Where is he going?
6. What time of day is it, and what is the state of the tide?

II

The following questions are about the poem’s symbolic meaning(s).

1. What does “crossing the bar” symbolise?
2. Who might the pilot be? Why cannot he be seen until the bar has been crossed?
3. Where are they going? What does the sea symbolise? What is the implication of the line “turns again home”?
4. Is the narrator (or I persona) unhappy to be crossing the bar? Why/why not?
5. Does the time of day and the state of the tide have any symbolic significance?
6. Religious symbolism often refers to death as arriving at a harbour after the difficult sea voyage of life. This poem describes the process in reverse: life was in a harbour and death takes the dead person, or his/her soul, out to sea. Is this of any significance?
7. The Victorian period is often associated with a decline in religious faith. Is there any evidence of this in the poem?

Writing Skills

1. Is Tennyson’s “Crossing the Bar” a conventionally Christian poem?