

# Break, Break, Break

~Alfred, Lord Tennyson

## Paraphrasing

In Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem "Break, Break, Break," the poet expresses profound grief and longing for a lost loved one. Here's an explanation of the stanzas:

### First Stanza:

"Break, Break, Break,  
On thy cold gray stones,  
O Sea! And I would that my tongue could utter  
The thoughts that arise in me."

### Paraphrasing:

The poet watches the relentless waves crashing on the cold, gray stones by the sea. The repetition of "Break, Break, Break" symbolizes his own overwhelming feelings of sorrow. He feels an intense inner turmoil but is unable to express his deep grief. The vast, unyielding sea reflects his emotional state—cold and full of sorrow, while his inability to "utter the thoughts" suggests that words cannot adequately convey his pain.

### Second Stanza:

"O, well for the fisherman's boy,  
That he shouts with his sister at play!  
O, well for the sailor lad,  
That he sings in his boat on the bay!"

### Paraphrasing:

Here, the poet contrasts his grief with the carefree joy of others. He observes the innocence of a fisherman's boy playing with his sister and a sailor lad singing as he sails on the bay. These figures represent the simplicity and happiness of life that continues around him, yet the poet himself is consumed by sorrow, making him feel isolated from the joy of others.

**Third Stanza:**

"And the stately ships go on  
To their haven under the hill;  
But O for the touch of a vanished hand,  
And the sound of a voice that is still!"

**Paraphrasing:**

The poet notes that life goes on—stately ships sail to their destinations, just as life continues for others. However, his mind is fixated on personal loss. He yearns for the touch of a "vanished hand" (the hand of the person he has lost) and "the sound of a voice that is still" (the voice of the person who is no longer alive). These lines are filled with a powerful longing for the past and the presence of the lost loved one.

**Fourth Stanza:**

"Break, break, break,  
At the foot of thy crags,  
O Sea! But the tender grace of a day that is dead  
Will never come back to me."

**Paraphrasing:**

In this final stanza, the poet again addresses the sea, whose waves continue to break against the rocks, symbolizing the relentless passage of time. He reflects on the fact that the "tender grace" of the past, the cherished moments with the person he has lost, will never return. The grief is eternal, like the continuous crashing of the waves, and the poet realizes that those moments are irretrievably gone.

Overall, Tennyson uses the imagery of the sea to mirror his feelings of sorrow and the permanence of loss. The poem is a meditation on grief, the passage of time, and the longing for what has been lost forever.

## Comprehension

### 1. Analyze the speaker's perspective in the poem.

The speaker in the poem is deeply grieving the loss of a loved one. His perspective is one of sorrow, longing, and isolation. He reflects on how life goes on for others—children play, sailors sing, and ships sail to their destinations—while he remains trapped in his grief. He yearns for the return of the "vanished hand" and the "voice that is still," but he knows that these cherished moments and the person are irretrievably lost. The speaker is caught between observing the world around him and the crushing weight of personal loss.

### 2. To whom is the poem addressed?

The poem is addressed primarily to the sea, which the speaker repeatedly invokes in lines like, "Break, break, break, On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!" The sea acts as a silent witness to his grief, mirroring the speaker's inner turmoil. The speaker also indirectly addresses his lost loved one through his yearning for the "vanished hand" and "still" voice, lamenting their absence.

### 3. Comment on the effect produced by the use of repetition in the poem.

Repetition in the poem, especially in the lines "Break, Break, Break", mimics the continuous crashing of the waves against the shore. This rhythmic repetition conveys the relentless, unyielding nature of both the sea and the speaker's grief. It emphasizes the speaker's emotional state, where waves of sorrow keep coming back, just like the tide. The repetition also creates a sense of helplessness, as the speaker can do nothing to stop the waves or his feelings of loss.

### 4. How do you analyze the feeling of the poet in the first two lines?

In the first two lines, the speaker is overcome by intense sorrow and frustration. The repeated "Break, break, break" reflects both the unending pounding of the sea and the speaker's emotional pain. He wishes he could express the overwhelming feelings that arise within him, but he feels that language is inadequate to convey his grief. This inability to speak mirrors the sea's relentless force, as though the poet's emotions, like the waves, are too powerful to be contained by mere words.

### 5. Identify personification in the poem.

Personification occurs in several places:

"On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!" – The sea is personified, as though it can listen to the speaker and respond.

“the touch of a vanished hand” and “the sound of a voice that is still” – The hand and voice are personified as parts of the lost loved one, representing the entirety of their presence and being.

#### **6. How is the poem a juxtaposition of transience and permanence?**

The poem juxtaposes transience (the fleeting nature of life and moments) with permanence (the unchanging elements of nature and grief):

Transience is represented by the fleeting moments of happiness enjoyed by others, like the fisherman’s boy playing or the sailor lad singing, and the "tender grace of a day that is dead," which will never return.

Permanence is represented by the continuous breaking of the sea’s waves and the unrelenting pain of loss, which seems eternal. The sea’s perpetual motion contrasts with the fact that the past and lost loved ones cannot return.

#### **7. Comment on the images and symbols used in the poem.**

Tennyson uses powerful imagery and symbols throughout the poem:

The sea symbolizes the passage of time, eternity, and the persistence of grief. Its endless breaking against the shore reflects the poet’s unceasing sorrow.

The "vanished hand" and "still" voice symbolize the lost loved one, representing the emotional impact of their absence.

The ships represent life moving forward, in contrast to the speaker’s emotional stagnation.

The cold gray stones of the shore reflect the bleakness of the poet’s inner world and the harsh, unyielding reality of loss.

#### **8. Evaluate as to where the ships are going.**

The ships are described as moving to "their haven under the hill," suggesting they are heading toward a safe harbor or destination. This symbolizes the ongoing motion of life and progress, in contrast to the speaker’s static, grief-stricken state. The ships represent the forward motion of time and life, while the poet remains anchored in his sorrow.

#### **9. Critically evaluate the poet's notion of never coming back.**

The poet expresses the idea that the past, especially the cherished moments with the loved one who has passed, will never return. The "tender grace of a day that is dead" symbolizes both the beauty of those moments and their permanence in memory, but also their inaccessibility. Tennyson acknowledges that, unlike the repetitive motions of the sea, human life and experiences are fleeting. This notion emphasizes the finality of loss, and the realization that once something is

gone—whether it be a loved one or a moment—it is gone forever, deepening the speaker’s sense of grief.

**10. Identify personification, metaphors, anaphora, hyperbole, alliteration, refrain, symbolism in the poem.**

**Personification:**

“On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!” – The sea is personified as though it can interact with the speaker.

“vanished hand” and “voice that is still” – Hands and voice are personified to represent the presence of the loved one.

**Metaphors:**

“vanished hand” and “voice that is still” are metaphors for the lost loved one.

The sea can also be viewed metaphorically as a symbol of time and the persistence of grief.

**Anaphora:**

The repetition of "O" at the beginning of lines, such as "O Sea," "O for the touch," and "O well for the fisherman's boy," is an example of anaphora, emphasizing the speaker’s longing and emotional intensity.

**Hyperbole:**

The poet’s longing for the "vanished hand" and the "sound of a voice that is still" may involve a degree of hyperbole, as he expresses an intense desire that feels larger than life, even though he knows it is impossible to fulfill.

**Alliteration:**

“Stately ships” and “tender grace of a day that is dead” use alliteration to enhance the musical quality of the poem.

**Refrain:**

The phrase “Break, break, break” acts as a refrain, repeated at both the beginning and the end of the poem to tie together the recurring theme of relentless grief.

**Symbolism:**

The sea symbolizes time, grief, and eternity.

The ships symbolize the forward movement of life.

The vanished hand symbolizes the lost loved one.

This combination of poetic devices contributes to the rich emotional texture and the depth of the poem's exploration of grief and longing.

## **Figures of Speech**

Alfred Lord Tennyson's "Break, Break, Break" contains several poetic devices that enhance the emotional depth and imagery of the poem. Here are some of the key figures of speech and poetic devices:

**1. Repetition:**

"Break, Break, Break" (repeated in the first and last stanzas) emphasizes the unrelenting motion of the sea and mirrors the poet's overwhelming sorrow and the relentless nature of grief. The repetition creates a rhythmic, pounding effect, echoing the waves crashing on the shore.

**2. Personification:**

"On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!" – The sea is personified, as though it is a living entity with which the poet can communicate. The use of "thy" and "O Sea!" elevates the sea to a human-like presence, adding emotional weight to the poet's address.

"But O for the touch of a vanished hand, And the sound of a voice that is still!" – The "vanished hand" and the "voice that is still" are personifications of the lost loved one, as if the hand and voice themselves are capable of action.

**3. Imagery:**

"Cold gray stones" – Vivid sensory imagery that evokes the bleakness of the poet's emotional state and the harshness of nature.

"The fisherman's boy...shouts with his sister at play" and "the sailor lad...sings in his boat on the bay" – These lines paint a picture of life's innocence and joy, contrasting with the poet's inner grief.

**4. Metaphor:**

“But O for the touch of a vanished hand” – The “vanished hand” represents the lost loved one, a metaphor for their physical absence and the speaker's longing for them.

### **5. Alliteration:**

“Stately ships” – The repetition of the initial “s” sound emphasizes the dignity and grandeur of the ships.

“But the tender grace of a day that is dead” – The repetition of the “d” sound in “day” and “dead” underscores the finality of the past.

### **6. Contrast:**

The poem contrasts the poet's deep grief with the carefree joy of others. For example, the fisherman's boy and the sailor lad are enjoying life, while the poet mourns the loss of a loved one. This heightens the sense of isolation in the speaker's sorrow.

### **7. Symbolism:**

The sea symbolizes the relentless passage of time and the unyielding nature of grief. The crashing waves represent the ceaseless emotional pain the poet feels.

The ships symbolize the forward motion of life, as they continue toward their destination, while the poet remains stuck in his grief.

### **8. Apostrophe:**

The poet addresses the sea directly: “On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!” and “At the foot of thy crags, O Sea!” This is an example of apostrophe, where an absent or non-human entity (in this case, the sea) is spoken to as if it can respond.

### **9. Enjambment:**

The continuation of a sentence or thought from one line to the next without a pause, as seen in: “And I would that my tongue could utter / The thoughts that arise in me.” The use of enjambment mirrors the fluid, unending motion of the waves and reflects the poet's uninterrupted stream of grief.

### **10. Parallelism:**

In the second stanza: “O, well for the fisherman's boy...O, well for the sailor lad”, the parallel structure emphasizes the poet's awareness of the carefree, ongoing lives of others, further contrasting with his own state of mourning.

Together, these poetic devices create a poignant, rhythmic meditation on loss and grief, capturing both the physical world of the sea and the emotional landscape of the speaker.

### **11.Synecdoche:**

It is a figure of speech where a part of something is used to represent the whole, or vice versa. In this poem, it occurs in the line:

“But O for the touch of a vanished hand, And the sound of a voice that is still!”

Here, "vanished hand" and "voice that is still" are examples of synecdoche. The hand and voice represent the entire person whom the speaker has lost. The hand and voice are parts of the person, but they stand in for the whole person, conveying the speaker's longing for their presence.

This use of synecdoche emphasizes the intimacy of the loss, as it focuses on the specific, personal aspects of the loved one that the speaker misses.