



Name:

Roll No:

Break, Break, Break
By Alfred, Lord Tennyson

ABOUT THE POET

Alfred, Lord Tennyson was born one of 12 children to a wealthy family in Lincolnshire, England. With poems such as In Memoriam, an elegy for a friend, and Idylls of the King, a long narrative, Tennyson became the most popular English poet of his time. Queen Victoria made him Poet Laureate in 1850. He is buried in Westminster Abbey.

INTRODUCTION

Alfred, Lord Tennyson composed "Break, Break, Break" in 1835, two years after the death of his close friend and fellow poet, Arthur Hallam. Because the poem's speaker laments the death of a close acquaintance, most readers read "Break, Break, Break" as an elegy to Hallam, though the poem stands on its own as a more general meditation on mortality and loss. Published in 1842, the poem is often read alongside Tennyson's "In Memoriam A. H. H.," a longer work that is more explicit in its commemoration of Hallam and the impact he had on Tennyson's life.

SETTING

The poem is set in the seas of the Victorian era and speaks in abstract comparisons about death, an unexpected but inevitable phase of life. The poet describes the physical occurrences in the sea and compares the booming waves and the jutting rocks to his inner disturbances. He also looks at the joy of the fisherman and the sailor who possess what they yearn for and how he is devoid of this joy because of his sorrowful state of mind. The poet further goes on to refer to death directly, emphasising on the waves of the sea crashing down on the sea shore, whereas the poet cannot go back to his past experiences with his lost friend, thus closing the poem in the same dark tone it opened in, and the same setting the poet has used to describe his torment.

SUMMARY

The speaker addresses the waves of the sea, telling them to crash against the rocky shore again and again. Watching this happen, the speaker yearns for the ability to express troubling thoughts that won't go away.

Looking out onto the water, the speaker watches a fisherman's son yelling out while playing with his sister, as well as a young sailor who sings while sailing through the cove.

There are also impressive boats sailing through the bay, and the speaker envisions them passing into ideal, somewhat heavenly destinations. But watching these ships doesn't distract the speaker from the memory of touching the hand of an acquaintance who no longer exists, whose voice has gone silent forever.

Again, the speaker calls out to the waves as they smash against cliffs along the shoreline again and again, feeling that the easy happiness of previous days will never return.

Line by line explanation

STANZA 1

Lines 1-4

Break, break, break,

On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!

And I would that my tongue could utter

The thoughts that arise in me.

- The speaker addresses the ocean directly, telling the waves to "break, break, break" onto the stony shore.
- After telling the sea to keep doing its thing, the speaker regrets that he can't express his thoughts.

- He doesn't come out and say, "I can't utter/ the thoughts," he says that his "tongue" can't "utter" them. This makes him seem kind of passive – *he's* not speaking, his "tongue" is doing it.
- He's not really thinking, either – the thoughts "arise in" him almost spontaneously, without effort.

STANZA 2

Lines 5-8

*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!*

- The speaker thinks it's all well and good that the fisherman's kid is "shout[ing]" and "play[ing]" with his sister.
- Repeating the same sentence structure, the speaker says it's great for the sailor who is "sing[ing]" in his boat.
- The repetition makes it sound like maybe the speaker *doesn't* really think it's all well and good for these people to be cheerful. Is he jealous, perhaps, of their happiness? Or of their ability to communicate it, since he admitted back in Stanza 1 that his "tongue" can't "utter/ the thoughts that arise"?

STANZA 3

Lines 9-12

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

- The fancy, "stately ships" pass by the speaker and head to their "haven," or protected port.
- The port is "under the hill," so there must be a big hill overlooking it.
- The speaker isn't distracted by the ships, though. Sure, he notices them, but his mind is elsewhere.
- He's just wishing he could "touch" the "vanish'd hand" and hear "the voice that is still." This is the first explanation of why the speaker is so sad. He's grieving for someone he loved who is now dead.
- He doesn't come out and describe the dead friend, though – he just lists a series of missing things: the "hand" and the "voice." The lost friend is described as a series of absent parts.

STANZA 4

Lines 13-16

*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.*

- The speaker repeats the first line again, telling the waves to "break, break, break" again.
- But it's repetition with a difference: in the first stanza, he tells the waves to break "on thy cold gray stones," and in the last stanza, he tells the waves to break "at the foot of thy crags."
- It's not exactly the same – time has gone by, and even the breaking of the waves has changed slightly. Maybe it's the tide coming in.
- The waves have changed slightly, and we see that time is passing, despite the tragedy that the speaker has suffered. Mournfully he says that the happy old days when his friend was alive will never return.

Poetic Devices used:

Metaphor – "And the stately ships go on/To their haven under the hill" – the ship is a metaphor of life.

Personification – "...a day that is dead" – Giving an inert thing like day, a character.

Synecdoche – "But O for the touch of a vanish'd hand/And the sound of a voice that is still" – hand, voice.

Paradox – It is a statement that is apparently contradictory as in “touch of the vanish’d hand,” and “the sound of a voice that is still.”

Onomatopoeia – “Break” – sound of the waves.

Juxtaposition- is seen through the contrast of different experiences. For example, the speaker is in a deep and un-abating depression which is quite different from the sailing who is singing “on the bay” or the ships that he images are going to a better land.

Enjambment- is a commonly used technique that can be seen in this poem in the transition between lines three and four of the first stanza as well as lines one and two of the third stanza.

Refrain - The refrain “Break, Break, Break” that consist of one word repeated three times parallels the waves that repeatedly beat the cliffs. The sea will continue to ‘break’ upon the rocks relentlessly, as we are reminded by the repetition of the phrase.

Rhyme Scheme – In each stanza, the rhyme scheme is ABCB.

Central Idea

The central idea of the poem is the loss of a loved one. The emotions the poet indirectly describes pertain to this loss and the medium used to describe it, the sea and all that it consists of, is also a play on the feeling of loss and separation. The poem goes on about the gory crashing of the waves and the grief of the poet as well as his inability to register pleasant feelings of joy and laughter as his sorrow has engulfed him, his loss being the loss of a very dear friend. It is an intense poem that brings forward the phases of life with the booming waves, the adventurous and content sailor, the happiness present in the presence of family, the journey of life to a destination and an eventual death, and though life might not be in the same order, the poem concludes on the note that loss is irreversible and separation painful and that completes the cycle of the presentation of loss as a central idea.

Tone

The poem proceeds in a very gloomy tone describing the rough phases of life and even the pleasant phases he describes is only coupled with his contrasting dark emotions. The tone of the poem is gloomy as well as negative that is clearly present in its entire framework of the different happenings that take place in the sea and the poet’s socially retreating emotions with regard to them. The poet manages to instil his depressing state of mind in the struggling, continuing and treasured moments he observes in the sea and thus maintains a holistic suppressed sorrow caused by the death of his close friend.

SYMBOL

The Sea

For the speaker, the sea represents the impermanence of life. Looking out at the water, the speaker recognizes that all things eventually come to an end—an idea embodied by the waves themselves, which crash against the rocks and, in doing so, lose form, thereby ceasing to exist as waves. Accordingly, the sea comes to stand for the inevitability of death. In the same way that even the most powerful waves break apart when they splash against the shore, all human lives someday come to an end.

Interestingly, though, some of the poem's happiest images take place on (or perhaps *in*) the sea, as a sailor sings in the bay and children play with one another while spending the day with their fisherman father. Similarly, beautiful and impressive boats sail away to unknown paradises. Consequently, the sea's embodiment of impermanence takes on a new layer, ultimately representing the fact that this impermanence is simply a fact of existence, one that shouldn't stop people from living their lives. In other words, the mere idea of impermanence is just a backdrop against which people should let their lives unfold.

The Poem as an example of Victorian poetry

The Elegiac tone

This poem is an elegy. The elegy is one of the most popular poetic forms of this period, a form of poetry that laments the dead or the past.

The Sense of Spiritual Doubt

The Victorian period was a period of religious doubt. The conflict between science and religion resulted in people’s sense of doubt about the validity of their beliefs. Darwin’s theory of evolution, in particular, led to a crisis of faith and spiritual doubt among so many people. The poem reveals

a secular rather than a religious attitude towards death. The poet’s attitude towards death is characterised by a sense of total loss and despair, rather than acceptance and comfort based on belief in life after death and hope of immortality.

A. Answer the following questions on the basis of the summary given above:

1. Who or what is being addressed in the first line?

2. In the first stanza, what does the speaker wish you could do? What does it say about his state of mind?

3. Who are the people mentioned in the second stanza? Where are they and what are they doing?

4. Read the third stanza. What does the speaker mention that has remained unchanged? What has changed?

5. **Will never come back to me.** What will never come back to the speaker? Why?

6. How does the poem show that life and nature go on despite what happens to human beings?

B. Appreciating the Poem

1. **Personification** is the style of giving human qualities to something non-human in order to make it easier to imagine and more interesting. This poem uses personification in the first stanza. Which thing is given human qualities and how?

2. **Repetition** is another technique used in this poem. Which words have been repeated? Why do you think these words have been repeated? What effect does the repetition produce?

3. a. Which words, phrases or lines express sadness and longing (a strong desire, especially for something which is difficult or impossible to have)?

- b. Which stanza captures a different mood - one of dry and light-heartedness?

4. Silence - or the inability to speak - has been mentioned twice in this poem. Who are the two people who cannot speak? Why?

C. Make sentences with the following words:

1. Haven: _____
2. Utter: _____
3. Stately: _____
4. Crag: _____
5. Bay: _____

For further clarification please visit: https://youtu.be/IRW_S1EQAcg

INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY

Draw a picture of something that you would equate with death and write a few lines on why you have chosen to draw that image.