

## “Break, Break, Break”- Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)

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

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!

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!

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.

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.

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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.

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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.

#### “Break, Break, Break” Themes

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#### Loss and Impermanence

For the speaker of “Break, Break, Break,” the fleeting nature of life is deeply troubling. The poem implies that the speaker is mourning someone’s death and being forced to face the fact that this person will never return. Although the poem doesn’t clarify the circumstances of the speaker’s loss, it’s clear that it has thoroughly unsettled the speaker, who can’t even stare out at the ocean without feeling tormented by the knowledge that everything in life eventually comes to an end.

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Everything around the speaker serves as a reminder that life is fleeting. Even the waves crashing against the shoreline represent this idea of impermanence, since these waves no longer exist in their original form once they've broken over the rocks. This reinforces the idea that nothing in the natural world lasts forever. And because people obviously exist in the natural world, this also holds true for everyone who has ever lived.

With this in mind, the speaker watches two children playing happily together and knows that someday their youth will be a thing of the past. Similarly, the young sailor singing nearby will someday be an old man, and the speaker will soon lose sight of the grand boats in the bay as they disappear from the horizon on their way to some unknown destination. Affronted by all of these ideas of change and transition, the speaker is unable to deny the impermanence of all things. This thought process is made evident by the fact that the speaker goes from considering the retreating ships to wistfully remembering the "touch of a vanish'd hand"—a phrase that underscores the speaker's dismay that humans effectively "vanish" through death. In the same way that the ships fade into the distance, humans also drift away from life.

Of course, most people are well aware that nothing lasts, but not everyone finds this so troubling. It is, after all, a fact of existence, something many people simply accept. The speaker, however, is particularly unnerved by this because a close acquaintance has recently died, making it difficult for the speaker to stop thinking about the relentless passage of time—there is, the speaker knows, no way to revisit the past to spend more time with this friend, and this greatly upsets the speaker. In this way, loss changes the way the speaker sees the world, suddenly making it harder to accept the reality that all things come to an end.

Ironically enough, though, the only kind of permanence in the speaker's life is loss itself, since nothing will ever reverse the death of this friend. No matter what happens, this person will "never come back" to the speaker. In turn, loss actually emerges as

the *only* dependable thing in life, even if it forces people like the speaker to recognize that everything else about existence is impermanent.

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Stricken by grief, the speaker can hardly imagine a world in which it might be possible to embrace happiness and undertake normal activities like sailing in the bay. However, the speaker doesn't *need* to imagine a world like this, since this kind of carefree joy is playing out directly before the speaker's eyes. Despite the speaker's grief, the world carries on like normal.

This dynamic emphasizes the fact that what the speaker feels in this moment is at odds with the simple reality that the rest of the world is proceeding unbothered. The anguish that feels so debilitating to the speaker doesn't even register for other people, and this [juxtaposition](#) only heightens the speaker's sorrow and makes it even harder to move on. Put another way, the speaker's pain has to do with the fact that life has gone on even though the speaker has been immobilized by grief.

To illustrate the tension between the speaker and the external world, "Break, Break, Break" plays with contrasts. For instance, the first stanza presents a bleak setting, calling the stones on the shoreline "cold" and "gray," and pairing this somber image with the speaker's inability to "utter" the troubling thoughts that continue to "arise." This clearly establishes the speaker's unhappiness, but the second stanza veers away from this gloomy tone as the speaker watches children playing nearby and a sailor singing in the bay. Suddenly, the "cold" and "gray" landscape of the poem transforms into a more lighthearted setting, one in which people go about their lives in a carefree manner. This illustrates just how little others are affected by the speaker's grief—indeed, what the speaker sees as an irrecoverable loss, the outside world doesn't even notice.

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The speaker, of course, is well aware that life won't stop to accommodate a person's individual sadness. With this in mind, the speaker uses a somewhat bitter tone when considering the happy people in the bay. By beginning the first and third lines of the second stanza with, "O, well for [...]," the speaker frames their happiness as an affront, as if sarcastically saying, "Oh, how nice for them." This demonstrates that it is painful for the speaker to witness such joy, making the process of moving on—the process of coping with loss—especially hard.

To make matters worse, the speaker is not only unable to move on, but also conscious that the past is "dead" and will "never come back." Consequently, the speaker is frozen in place, stuck between a longing for the irretrievable past and an inability to engage with the present. In turn, readers see just how difficult it is to move on in moments of sorrow, especially when the surrounding world seems so indifferent to a person's pain and emotional suffering.

Additional summary:-

The sea is breaking on the "cold gray stones" before the speaker. He laments that he cannot give voice to his thoughts. Yes, the fisherman's boy shouts with his sister while they play, and the young sailor sings in his boat, but the speaker cannot express such joy. Other ships travel silently into port, their "haven under the hill," and this observation seems to remind him of the disappearance of someone he cared for. No longer can he feel the person's touch or hear the person's voice. Unlike the waves, which noisily "break, break, break" on the rocks as they repeatedly come in, the "tender grace" of bygone days will never return to him.

### *Analysis*

This short poem carries the emotional impact of a person reflecting on the loss of someone he (or she) cared for. Written in 1834 right after the sudden death of Tennyson's friend Arthur Henry Hallam, the poem was published in 1842. Although some have interpreted the speaker's grief as sadness over a lost lover, it probably reflects the feeling at any loss of a beloved person in death, like Tennyson's dejection over losing Hallam.

The poem is four stanzas of four lines each, each quatrain in irregular iambic tetrameter. The irregularity in the number of syllables in each line might convey the instability of the sea or the broken, jagged edges of the speaker's grief. Meanwhile, the ABCB rhyme scheme in each stanza may reflect the regularity of the waves.

On the surface, the poem seems relatively simple and straightforward, and the feeling is easy to discern: the speaker wishes he could give voice to his sad thoughts and his memories, to move and speak like the sea and others around him. The poem's deeper interest is in the series of comparisons between the external world and the poet's internal world. The outer world is where life happens, or where it used to happen for the speaker. The inner world is what preoccupies him now, caught up in deep pain and loss and the memories of a time with the one who is gone.

For example, in the first stanza, the sea is battering the stones. The speaker appears frustrated that the sea can keep moving and making noise while he is unable to utter his thoughts. The sea's loud roar, its ability to vent its energy, is something he lacks. The repetition of "break" aptly conveys the ceaseless motion of the waves, each wave reminding him of what he lacks.

In the second stanza, Tennyson similarly expresses distance between himself and the happy people playing or singing where they are. They possess joy and fulfillment, whether together or alone, but he does not. The brother and sister have each other; the sailor has his boat; the speaker is alone. They have reason to voice pleasure, but he does not. One might sense envy here, but "O, well" also suggests that these blithe young people have losses yet to come.

In the third stanza the poet sees the "stately ships" moving to their "haven under the hill," either to port or over the horizon. Either way, they seem content with a destination. But the mounded grave is no pleasant haven, in contrast. That end means the end of activity; there is no more hand to touch, no more voice to hear. Again the speaker is caught up in his internal thoughts, his memory of the mourned figure overshadowing what the speaker sees around him. The critic H. Sopher also interprets the contrast in this stanza as such: "The stateliness of the ships contrasts with the poet's emotional imbalance; and the ships move *forward* to an attainable goal ... while the poet looks *back* to a 'vanish'd hand' and a 'voice that is still.'"

In the fourth stanza, the speaker returns to the breaking of waves on the craggy cliffs. The waves come again, again, again, hitting a wall of rock each time. But for him there is no return of the dead, just the recurring pain of loss. Why speak, why act? Sopher explains that "the poet's realization of the fruitlessness of action draws the reader's attention to the fact that the sea's action is, seemingly, fruitless too—for all its efforts [it] can no more get beyond the rocks than the poet can restore the past." Nevertheless, both the sea and the speaker continue with their useless but repeated actions, as though there is no choice. The scene evokes a sense of inevitability and hopelessness.

While the feeling here could involve merely the loss of a romantic relationship, it seems more poignant if the speaker has no hope for the return of the one who is lost. Without a death, there is no opportunity to connect the "hill" to a mounded grave, the "still" voice would be harder to interpret, and the "day that is dead" would be a weaker metaphor.

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## Rhetorical Devices

Following are examples of figures of speech and other rhetorical devices in "Break, Break, Break":

Apostrophe (Lines 1 and 2): The narrator addresses the sea.

Personification and metaphor also occur in Lines 1 and 2, for the poet regards the sea as a human being.

Alliteration (Line 8): **b**oat on the **b**ay

(Lines 9-12): Stanza 3 uses this figure of speech as follows:

And the stately ships go on  
To their **h**aven under the **h**ill;  
But O for the touch of a **v**anished **h**and,  
And the **s**ound of a **v**oice that is **s**till!

Alliteration (Line 15): **d**ay that is **d**ead

Repetend: Line 13 repeats Line 1; Line 7 repeats the first two words of Line 5.

Paradox: *Touch of a vanished hand* (Line 11), *sound of a voice that is still* (Line 12).

## **Themes**

### Grief

The main theme is bereavement, heartache, emptiness. In the narrator's dark hour of grief, the sun rises, children laugh, business goes on as usual. How could the world be so cruel and unfeeling?

### Preciousness of Youth

Tennyson's friend, Arthur Hallam, was only 22 when he died. The shock of Hallam's death impressed upon Tennyson how priceless youth is. To underscore this idea, and to express the agony he suffers at the loss of young Hallam, Tennyson presents images of youthful joy: the fisherman's son playing with his sister and the "sailor lad" singing in the bay.

### Indifference of Nature

Nature continues to function according to its rhythms and cycles regardless of what happens, good or bad, to human beings. The temperature may plummet just when a poor family runs out of fuel. The sun may shine and the birds may sing in the middle of the bloodiest of battles. And the sea will rise and fall in a defiant, unrelenting rhythm that refuses to acknowledge tragedy in the everyday life of average men. Tennyson laments this cold indifference in "Break, Break, Break."

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Further Literary Analysis:-

There are several simple instances of alliteration, as in l. 8 ('boat on the bay'), l. 10 ('haven under the hill'), and l. 15 ('day that is dead'). It is, however, in the arrangement of the vowel sounds in it that the poem becomes particularly interesting.

The real poetic beauty of the lyric could be seen and felt in the lines that are loaded with poignant suggestions, especially those that hint at the death of the poet's friend, Arthur Hallam, and the deep sorrow and sense of irreparable loss which he experienced on account of that. The indirect reference to the friend, through phrases such as 'a vanish'd hand' and 'a voice that is still', lifts the expression to a universal level. It is noteworthy that in these very phrases Tennyson has introduced two admirable examples of synecdoche (a classical figure of speech in which the poet uses the part, e.g., *ivory*, or *honey*, for the whole, e.g., *elephant*, or *bee*), which, through its typical form of understatement, heightens the melancholic effect.

It is in the last lines, above all, with their composite poetic impact, that Tennyson conveys his sense of an irreparable human loss most forcefully. Phonologically, the lines have alliteration in 'day-dead', assonance in 'tender-dead' (semantically, a terrible contrast) and 'grace-day', half-rhyme in 'tender-never', and euphony in the use of single sounds like /t/ and /r/. All these musical resources are put to use by the poet towards a powerful expression of his deep personal sorrow.

We are thus made to feel the pathos of the permanent loss, that death threatens for a human being universally, even as we come to think of the poet's own bereavement. And this feeling is deepened greatly by the three sharply contrasting pictures which precede in the main body of the poem, showing routine bubbling, cheerful life that goes on all around: the fisherman's boy that shouts, the sailor's lad that sings, and the stately ships that go on to their haven. Though dealing 'with sea-faring life, the pictures have an idyllic quality about them. The simplicity and clarity with which these pictures are drawn make the lines all the more powerful in their appeal.

The poem is thus particularly rich in its imagery. The images serve as a means for the poet to communicate his emotion. And there is a superb economy of style: the poet draws vivid pictures almost with single strokes. 'Grey stones', 'sister at play', 'stately ships' and 'haven under the hill' call up clearly visual images. 'Shouts', 'sings', and, in a strangely negative way, even the phrase, 'the voice that is still' appeal to the reader's sense of hearing; while 'cold' and 'the touch of a vanished hand' have markedly tactile associations. The poet's exceptional self-control and meticulous choice of detail make for the deep emotional impact of each image.

The heavy, monotonous roar of the sea-waves breaking on a rocky shore has often produced a deep, nameless sadness in the human heart. Poets and philosophers have given voice to their

gloom in the presence of the sea since the very early days. Tennyson's heart is moved all the more deeply, while he sits by the sea, because the general feeling of sadness induced by the waves is made sharper and more specific for him by the recent death of his young, promising friend.

In fact, 'Break, Break, Break', though necessarily short, being a lyric, is particularly remarkable for the success with which its different elements and aspects — phonological, syntactic, semantic and stylistic — are integrated. Its stately rhythm and harmony, the three vivid pictures of seafaring life, the controlled and effective use of various figures such as apostrophe and exclamation, and the depth and sincerity of feelings expressed are all fused together to produce one finely unified piece of poetic art. The poem thus provides an apt example, at an early date, of Tennyson's excellence as a lyric poet.