

Show your acquaintance with Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem "Break Break Break".

(B.A. English Subsidiary. Part-1.Paper-1)

"Break, Break, Break" is an elegy by Alfred Lord Tennyson on the death of his friend Arthur Hallam. The author imagines to be standing near the cliff on the seashore and addressing to the sea waves which are lashing the rocks repeatedly. The poet finds an analogy and expresses it implicitly. Grief is one of the most powerful emotions that a human being can experience. This is the predominant theme of the poem 'Break, Break, Break' by Alfred Tennyson, written around 1834, approximately a year after the death of his close friend. 'Break, Break, Break' can be interpreted as a written example of the grief felt by Tennyson at the loss of his friend. This poem will examine the various techniques used by Tennyson to convey his emotion to the reader.

He wishes that the 'waves' of his grief would break the inarticulateness (inability to speak out) in his heart, so that he also expresses his grief easily. The speaker emotionally commands the sea to "break". He wants the sea waves to break on the cliffs; but it is also possible to interpret the lines as demanding to 'break' the cold gray stones of the cliff. The 'cold gray stones' are symbolic of the hardened heart of his inexpressible grief.

In the first stanza the poet says that the torment of his heart at the death of his friend is tremendous. There is a struggle like the struggle of the sea waves on the stormy shores. The question before him is how he can express adequately the thoughts which are rushing into his mind. In the second stanza the poet says that life is full of joy for the fisherman's son and daughter who are laughing and shouting merrily. The poet, on the other hand, is entirely in a different mood. He is restless and grief-stricken at the death of his friend. The poet admires the innocent joy of these youngsters but he is sorry because he cannot share it.

The lad of the sailor is also happy and sings in his boat face to face with the magnificence of the sea. But such joy is not for the poet. In the third stanza the poet says that the majestic ships ply on their destination under the hill. The poet however has no definite plan about his life and he misses his friend Hallam whose voice and touch were so soft and tender. The grief of the poet is terribly intense. In the two lines:

“But O for the touch of a vanish’d hand
And the sound of a voice that is still!”

The speaker turns aside seas and a very different picture of life. Unlike himself (grief-ridden) and the cold grey stones, the fisherman’s boy who is playing with his sister looks gay. So does the sailor’s lad singing in his boat on the bay. They’re also the “stately” ships going ‘on’ to their destinations. They all contrast with the speaker’s plight. They put the speaker’s grief-stricken situation on a contrastive prominence. He remembers the touch of his friend’s “vanished hand”, and the sound of his voice. The friendly voice has become still.

The speaker looks at the sea again and addresses to it once more. By this time he realizes that even if he manages to express his grief, the grace of his friend will never come back to him. The wish to express is itself no solution to the problem.

The poem is remarkable for the sound symbolism in it. The refrain “Break, Break, Break” that consists of one word repeated thrice parallels the waves that repeatedly beat the cliffs. Syntactically (structure of sentence) the line is a broken sentence. Economically empathic, the idea is further reinforced by the nature of the very sound the word is made of. The sentence of b-r-k makes a cracking sound; ‘b’ explodes; ‘r’ is harsh and ‘k’ stops before the pause of comma, ‘gray’, ‘stone’, ‘utter’, ‘crag’, ‘dead’ and even ‘tender’ (ironically) reiterate the same plosive, harsh and heavy sounds. They go together with the ideas of grief and the wish of breaking wherever they occur. We can also draw a neat distinction of these features with the absence of such sounds in the second and third stanza, which draw a picture of carefree children’s life and the ships.

The poem is written in four stanzas of four lines each: the first four and the last six are about grief, and the third stanza falls short of giving happy life. The rhyming scheme is abcb but with the harmony of the children’s life the rhyme also adds up to aaba. Master of technical and musical perfection, Tennyson seems to carve

each word carefully into perfect form. Our understanding of the real incident of his friend's death strikes us the more with the heartrending appeal to the 'sea' – a vast image of sorrow of the sad!

The repetition of the word 'Break' in the opening line, can be viewed on a number of levels; at its most basic it can be seen to be a literal description of the waves breaking upon 'they cold gray stones', it could however, also be describing the heartbreak felt by the voice of the poem. When the repetition of the word 'break' is combined with the trimeter structure of the opening line, it forms a rhythmic beat, akin to that of a ticking clock; which symbolically can be perceived to represent not only the unrelenting breaking of the sea, but also the unrelenting march of time itself, which we all eventually submit to. On another level the breaking waves can be a metaphor for the waves of emotion breaking over the voice, drowning them in their grief.

The poet is quite in grief looking at the liveliness and beauty of nature and the world which never fades. But he is no more lively as his friend has left him leaving alone here in this world. So, the poet feels that the happy moments of life never stays for long, it fades away within a short span of time. As he says that human life changes from childhood to old age and finally death, the way happy memories of life also becomes the vanished past after death. He is missing his lost friend while he is standing on the bank of the sea. He mourns over and over again the absence of the self touch of his dear friend and he would never hear that sweet voice that had been shared in the past as he is no more with him right now.

In the final two lines of the opening stanza, the voice reveals their desire to communicate 'The thoughts that arise' within them, this exhibits a high level of irony given that the whole of the poem itself is an expression of their 'thoughts'. The theme of communication follows on into the second stanza; the descriptions of a 'fisherman's boy' shouting with 'his sister at play!', and a 'sailor lad' singing in 'his boat on the bay!', both show examples of the worlds ability to make noise which is in direct contrast to the voice. They both also show that despite the voice of the poem feeling as if the world has ended, it has in fact carried on. The use of an exclamation mark at the end of both descriptions can be viewed to signify both the voice's irritation to these interruptions to his silent grief, and also their annoyance at the worlds seeming indifference to their anguish.

The third stanza shows an example of Tennyson's careful choice of words when describing the destination of the 'stately ships'; he chooses to use the word 'haven' instead of the more obvious harbour. This works because of the two different meanings of the chosen word, when read in context it refers to the port where the ships are heading, however its alternate meaning of a place of shelter and protection fits perfectly with the underlying theme of the poem; being that shelter and protection from their grief is something that the voice is looking for. There is also a point of interest when noting the location of the 'haven' where the ships are heading, it is describe as being 'under the hill:', this could be symbolic of being buried, which would tie in with the themes of death and grief that are present within the poem. The final two lines of the third stanza reaffirm the yearning felt by the voice, this time for 'the touch of a vanish'd hand', and to once again hear the 'voice that is still!'; the notion of a mute voice is something that was originally seen in the opening stanza, this time however the 'still' voice is refering to the deceased, this link is something with strengthens the link between the voice and the source of their grief; this link between voice and departed is something that strengthens the connection of the two to the reader, allowing the grief of the voice's loss to feel more authentic.

The final stanza starts with the repetition of 'Break', seen in the opening line. This brings a sense of the poem coming full circle and allows the reader to conclude that the end is coming near. By using this repetition once again it is established that the voice's state of mind and indeed the theme of the poem remain firmly entrenched in grief; despite all that has gone before it the reiteration of the repetition of 'Break' construe that the voice's heart is still broken, indeed even that their mind, body and soul are broken too. This also forms a form of connection between the voice and the deceased, where we have the literally dead person, we also have the voice themselves, who is experiencing a form of living death, isolated within their own grief unable to share in the joy of the world exhibited by the 'fisherman's boy' and the 'sailor lad', but also unable to even communicate the immense sorrow that they are experiencing; on both ends of the spectrum of human emotion they are in isolation.

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.

In conclusion upon reading 'Break, Break, Break', the reader is left in little doubt as to what the predominant theme of the poem is. Tennyson achieves this on two levels, firstly in a literal sense, upon an initial read through of the poem we are presented with a description of a person that has suffered loss and is grieving as a result; Tennyson reinforces this theme to the reader through clever use of techniques such as repetition, structure and choice of language and punctuation, these work at a level where the reader does not have to be consciously aware of them in order to succeed. At the end, it can be said that "Break, Break, Break" is a melancholic poem in which the poet Lord Alfred Tennyson has expressed his emotions fantastically in a beautiful and lucid manner for which it has become a superb creation of his life.

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