

BREAK BREAK BREAK – SYMBOLS

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.

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 as 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!