

Tennyson's Poems Summary and Analysis of "Break, break, break"

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.