

12th Lecture

Break, Break, Break

By Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)

1

Break,¹ break, break,
On thy cold gray stones, O² Sea!
And I would³ that my tongue could utter
The thoughts that arise in me.¹

2

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!⁴

3

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

4

Break, break, break,
At the foot of thy crags,⁵ O Sea!
But the tender grace of a day that is dead
Will never come back to me.

Tennyson was one of a family of twelve. The place where he was brought up was a very retired one and here from childhood. Tennyson stored his mind with those impressions of nature to which it was ever deeply sensitive. He published his poems in 1840, which firmly established him as the leading poet of the day. He was created poet- laureate in 1850.

INTRODUCTION

This is a sad poem inspired by the death of Tennyson's intimate friend- Arthur Hallam. The sea with its waves breaking against the shore awakens in the poet memories of bygone days and reminds him of happy days that passed never to return. In stanza 1, the poet expresses his inability to describe the thoughts that arise in him.

In stanza 2, he envies the happiness of the fisherman's boy who plays with his sister and the sailor who sings happily in his boat. In stanza 3, he misses the kind of touch and the voice of a friend who is dead. The happiness of bygone days never comes back (stanza 4).

Substance of the poem

The waves of the sea are rising and falling. As if sharing the grief of the poet, the strike their head against the rocky and break into water drops. The waves of the sea, like the poet himself,

remain helpless in conveying their grief to the shore. The poet observes that 'human life goes on as usual'. The stately ships come into the harbor and go out of it as usual'. The stately ships come into the harbor and go out of it as usual, and the children are shouting joyfully at their game.

However, neither the sympathy of nature, not the throb and zest of life around him, can serve to lessen his grief. His sorrow is too deep for words. His friend is dead, and he will never again hear his voice, nor touch his hand. The pleasure which he enjoyed in his company will never be again:

**But the tender grace of a day that is dead
Will never come back to me.**

Critical notes, comments & explanation

Stanza 1

The poet sits on the grave of his friend Arthur Hallam on a lonely hill, overlooking the Bristol Channel. The poet is sad at the death of his friend. His sorrow is so deep that he fails to find adequate words to express it.

Break, break.....O sea-

The waves of the sea are rising and falling and breaking into water drops. It seems to the poet that they are striking their head against the sea-shore, as if in sympathy with his grief. Like him they, too, fail to express their grief.

Stanza 2

The sailor's lad, and the fisherman's boy are happy at play. They are shouting with joy. The boy alone is sad. Life is happy and pleasant for the fisherman's boy, and not for the poet.

Stanza 3

The ships are coming and going as usual. But the poet's friend is dead. He can no longer hear his voice or feel the touch of his hand. Life will never again be the same for him. The poet wishes his friend were alive and he could hear his voice or feel the touch of his hand.

Stanza 4

Nature may mourn the death of his friend in sympathy with him, but alas. His friend will never live again. He will never again know that happiness which he enjoyed in his company.

Type of Work and Date of Composition

"Break, Break, Break" is a lyric poem that Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892) was believed to have completed in 1834. It centers on Tennyson's grief over the death of his best friend, Arthur Hallam, a fellow poet. Lyrical poetry presents the deep feelings and emotions of the poet as opposed to poetry that tells a story or presents a witty observation. A lyric poem often has a pleasing musical quality. The word *lyric* derives from the Greek word for *lyre*, a stringed instrument in use since ancient times.

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): **boat** 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

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.

Model Question

Tennyson was born in.....

A-1807

B-1808

C- 1809

D- 1810

The correct answer is (c)