Break, Break, Break

POEM TEXT

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

5 O, well for the fisherman's boy,
6   That he shouts with his sister at play!
7 O, well for the sailor lad,
8   That he sings in his boat on the bay!

9 And the stately ships go on
10   To their haven under the hill;
11 But O for the touch of a vanish'd hand,
12   And the sound of a voice that is still!

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

SUMMARY

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.

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.

THEMES

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.

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.

> **Where this theme appears in the poem:**
> • Lines 1-16

THE DIFFICULTY OF MOVING ON

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.

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.

> **Where this theme appears in the poem:**
> • Lines 1-16

🔍 LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

> *Break, break, break,*
> *On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!*

The beginning of the poem is rhythmically intense, as the speaker repeats the word "break" to create a line of three stressed syllables in a row (this repetition is an example of epizeuxis). This relentless rhythm builds a startling opening that is reminiscent of the sound of powerful waves crashing over rocks on a shoreline—the exact thing that the speaker focuses on in the first stanza, calling out to the sea and telling it to "break" upon the nearby stones.

The alliteration in this line adds to this sense of emphasis, as the /br/ sound repeats three times. Similarly, the assonance that appears in the long /a/ sound ("br**ea**k") pushes the effect of this repetition even further, making it sound even *more* untiring. In this way, the natural world surrounding the speaker emerges right away as bleak and unforgiving.

On the whole, the speaker's use of apostrophe to address the sea not only establishes the setting of the poem (clarifying that the speaker is standing on the shoreline), but also highlights that the speaker sees the surrounding environment as quite harsh. The speaker continues in line 2 to employ bleak terms, using the words "cold" and "gray" in reference to the rocks on the shore. Along with the power of the first line, these descriptors make the scene of the poem feel hostile, as if the speaker is fixated on all the ways in which the surrounding world is cruel and inhospitable.

This interpretation is reinforced by the metrical nuances of the first two lines: after the three consecutive stresses in the first line, the poem's next stressed syllable lands on the word "cold":

> **Break, break, break,**
> On thy **cold** gray **stones,** O **Sea!**

"Break, Break, Break" is metrically complex, since it strays from convention in its use of rhythm. Having said that, the poem frequently employs trimeter (lines with three metrical feet), as is the case in the second line. The first metrical foot in the second line is an anapest, which is a poetic foot with two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable (in this

case, "On thy cold"). This places an emphasis on "cold" that ultimately expands upon the speaker's description of the environment as grim and desolate (though it's worth noting that some might argue that "thy" should receive a stress, too—either way, though, "cold" would remain stressed). Accordingly, readers are encouraged to view the immediate landscape as ruthless and severe.

At the same time, it's worth noting that this landscape has yet to be truly revealed, since the only thing readers have been told about it is that waves are breaking on "cold gray stones." As the poem continues, then, it remains to be seen whether the speaker's dreary description of this landscape is accurate, or if this bleak presentation is actually a reflection of the speaker's internal emotional state.

LINES 3-4

> And I would that my tongue could utter
> 	The thoughts that arise in me.

The third and fourth lines of the poem clarify the speaker's emotional state. Looking out at the waves as they crash against the rocky shore, the speaker struggles with thoughts that continue to "arise." More specifically, the speaker wants to "utter" these thoughts, ultimately implying that it is difficult to voice these feelings. Of course, readers don't yet know what, exactly, these feelings are, but it's clear that they must be upsetting. Accordingly, the speaker has a hard time facing them head-on, wishing it were easier to articulate these emotions.

To illustrate how difficult it is to face troubling thoughts, the speaker employs some rather tricky meter in the third line:

> And I **would** | that my **tongue** | could **ut**ter

Like most of the lines in the poem, this line is in trimeter, meaning that it has three metrical feet. However, the last foot in the line is fairly rare. Whereas the first two feet are anapests (feet comprised of two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable), the last foot might be scanned as an amphibrach, comprised of a stressed syllable surrounded by two unstressed syllables. This foot is fairly uncommon in English poetry, and it makes the end of this line sound off-kilter, an effect that ultimately illustrates the speaker's unease. The thoughts that "arise" in the speaker are so troubling, it seems, that the mere idea of "utter[ing]" them is uncomfortable.

Further, there is a similarity between the surrounding environment and the speaker's tumultuous emotions. Or, to be more precise, a similarity exists between these emotions and the way the speaker *describes* the surrounding environment. Indeed, the first two lines of the poem focus on the brutal way that the waves crash onto the shore. Then, in the fourth line of the stanza, the speaker describes unsettling thoughts using the same kind of language one might apply to powerful waves. To that end, thoughts "arise" in the speaker as if they are waves

themselves. In this sense, the thoughts that the speaker is apparently so unable to voice are capable of overwhelming the speaker with the same violent force with which the sea crashes over the "cold gray stones" of the shore.

Expressing troublesome emotions is often a way of coping with hardship. Feeling incapable of voicing such emotions, though, the speaker focuses on the external world, thinking about the sea and the shoreline instead of articulating an internal sense of discontent. By the end of the first stanza, it seems likely that the speaker has *projected* a sense of unhappiness and misery onto the surrounding landscape.

In other words, the speaker's bleak characterization of the shore in the first two lines is, in all likelihood, little more than a projection, as the speaker superimposes feelings of helplessness onto the immediate circumstances. As a result, the first stanza sets readers up for the juxtaposition that appears in the following lines between the speaker's unhappiness and the evident joy in the surrounding world.

LINES 5-8

> 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!

At this point in the poem, it isn't yet clear why the speaker is upset. The only thing readers know is that the speaker wants to express emotions that are difficult to "utter," though these emotions continue to "arise" despite this difficulty.

It is perhaps because the speaker doesn't know how to deal with these emotions that the second stanza features yet another attempt on the speaker's behalf to focus on the surrounding environment. This time, though, the speaker doesn't fixate on the relentless waves and the bleak landscape. Instead, the second stanza is almost celebratory, as the speaker observes happy children playing with one another. With this shift, readers see that the world around the speaker is not as desolate and dreary as it appears at the beginning of the poem.

In fact, happiness is all around the speaker, as evidenced by the joyous shouts that come from the fisherman's son and daughter and the care-free singing from the sailor in the bay. All of a sudden, what seemed like a dismal setting transforms into a pleasant scene, one in which children and sailors alike are relaxed enough to simply enjoy themselves.

It's worth pausing for a moment to consider the sailor, since his actions indicate something important about the speaker's surroundings—namely, that they aren't nearly as harsh as the speaker has implied. In the first stanza, the speaker shouts out to the sea, making use of apostrophe to address it as if it's a dangerous, unwieldy, and powerful being. In doing so, the speaker creates an image of a roiling sea with large, overwhelming waves. And yet, readers now learn that there is a

sailor singing in his boat on the bay.

This creates juxtaposition between the first and second stanzas, suggesting that the waters are actually calm, since it's unlikely that this young man would be enjoying himself in this manner if he were thrashing about in topsy-turvy conditions. Once again, then, it becomes clear that the speaker's original description of the general surroundings are inaccurate, ultimately influenced by the speaker's own troubled state of mind.

It is precisely because of this discrepancy between the external world and the speaker's internal condition that the speaker adopts a disdainful tone in the second stanza. At first, these four lines about the happy children and the carefree sailor seem celebratory, but upon further consideration, readers will perhaps sense that the speaker holds these people's contentment against them. "O, well for the fisherman's boy," the speaker says, using an ironic tone to imply that—although this happiness is good for the fisherman's son—the speaker cannot benefit from the young boy's joy. Similarly, it's all well and good that the sailor sings to himself, but this does nothing to improve the speaker's mood.

This general attitude is reflected in the meter, since the word "well" receives extra emphasis in both the fifth and seventh lines. For instance, the fifth line scans like this:

O, || **well** | for the **fish-** | erman's **boy**

One could argue that the first foot in this line is an iamb (a metrical foot containing an unstressed syllable followed by an unstresed syllable), but the caesura between "O" and "well" arguably lends a stress to both syllables. Either way, "well" receives a fairly prominent stress, suggesting a certain amount of sarcasm on the speaker's behalf. After all, the word "well" in this context can be interpreted as "good," as if the speaker is saying, "O, good for the fisherman's boy." This, in turn, underscores the speaker's irony and overall inability to share the boy's contentment. Simply put, then, the happiness that the speaker recognizes in the surrounding world feels inaccessible and remote, even if it is all around. Feeling alone with sorrow, then, the speaker resents the world's indifference to this suffering.

LINES 9-10

And the stately ships go on
To their haven under the hill;

The ninth and tenth lines of "Break, Break, Break" continue the speaker's list of things in the surrounding environment that represent happiness—a happiness from which the speaker feels excluded. Looking out over the bay, the speaker watches "stately ships" retreat to unknown destinations. The speaker uses sibilance in line 9, using the soothing and pleasing /s/ and /sh/ sounds in "stately ships" to convey a sense of beauty. But if

this seems at first like a straightforward observation of a pleasant scene, it soon becomes clear that these two lines actually complicate the poem and provide insight into the nature of the speaker's unhappiness.

First, it's important to note that the ships are moving *away* from the speaker. Watching from afar, the speaker experiences a feeling of having been left behind. This aligns with the second stanza's implication that the speaker can't participate in the external world's various pleasures. Indeed, line 9 underscores the extent to which life is slipping away from the speaker as the speaker stands idly on the shoreline and thinks dismal thoughts.

Furthermore, line 10 introduces an entirely new dynamic to the poem, since the language used to describe the ships' destination is ambiguous and carries certain spiritual or divine connotations. The word "haven" implies a sense of retreat or refuge, and the notion that this refuge exists under a "hill" creates an image of an idyllic place, a sanctuary of sorts where a cove is nestled beneath a mountain to create a feeling of comfort and safety.

If this place sounds heavenly, that's because it is: in the speaker's mind, these "stately ships" are retreating to destinations that are so perfect they resemble heaven itself. This notion is reinforced by the speaker's assertion that the ships "go on" to this haven, a phrase that denotes transition, as if the ships are passing from the living world to the world of the divine.

That the speaker shifts to these existential thoughts indicates that the unhappy tone that runs throughout the poem has something to do with death and loss. According to this mindset, it seems likely that the speaker's unhappiness is related to loss because, rationally speaking, a person who *isn't* mourning probably wouldn't look at boats on the horizon and imagine them sailing to some unknown, heavenly paradise. In this way, then, these two lines subtly contextualize the rest of the poem, hinting that the speaker is struggling with some sort of loss and, consequently, with the idea of things retreating into the unknown—ideas that are confirmed in the following two lines.

LINES 11-12

But O for the touch of a vanish'd hand,
And the sound of a voice that is still!

Lines 11 and 12 confirm that the speaker's unhappiness throughout the poem is fueled by feelings of loss. In particular, the speaker longs for the ability to touch the hand of somebody who has died. It's important to pay attention to the specific language that the speaker uses here, especially since the word "vanish'd" gives rise to similar imagery as the "stately ships" disappearing to a "haven under the hill." In both cases, the speaker has been left behind, unable to interact with either the deceased loved one or the beautiful boats. Happiness, it seems, isn't accessible to the speaker, as contentment has all but

"vanish[e]d" with this person's death.

And yet, contentment *hasn't* vanished on the whole. On the contrary, happiness is everywhere the speaker looks, from the playing children to the singing sailor to the majestic boats. The problem, then, isn't that the speaker can't recognize the joy in life, but that this joy has disappeared from the speaker's grasp. The only happiness in the speaker's life exists in the past, rendering it all but useless.

To that end, the speaker remembers the "sound of a voice that is still," recalling a time when it was still possible to speak with this loved one. In other words, this person only exists in memory, which is why the speaker thinks of the voice as having become "still"—indeed, the person's voice is lost to the past.

As if to emphasize the way that the happiness of the past has slipped out of the speaker's grasp, the speaker again uses [sibilance](link) in line 12:

> And the sound of a voice that is still!

By weaving the /s/ sound throughout these words, the speaker creates movement within this line. This sense of momentum or slipperiness represents the speaker's inability to recapture what has been lost—namely, the voice of the speaker's close acquaintance. What's more, the sibilant movement in this line [juxtaposes](link) the fact that the voice of the speaker's loved one has become "still" in death.

On the whole, the speaker is not only unable to engage with the present world as it continues to go along like normal, but is also unable to meaningfully engage with the only thing that might bring the speaker happiness: the past. After all, this deceased loved one no longer exists, having completely "vanish[e]d" in death, so the most the speaker can do is reminisce about a lost time. In this way, the speaker is effectively stalled out by grief, hung up on the discrepancy between the world's indifference and the speaker's own troubled emotional state.

LINES 13-16

> 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.

In the final stanza, the speaker brings back the [epizeuxis](link) of the opening line, repeating, "Break, break, break." This reminds readers that the speaker is on the shore and watching waves crash over the rocks. Because the previous stanza focuses on loss and impermanence (with the "stately ships" disappearing on the horizon and the memory of a "vanish'd hand"), the image of waves "break[ing]" takes on new meaning, ultimately representing the fleeting qualities of the natural world. In the same way that the speaker's dead loved one has "vanish[e]d" in death, the waves cease to exist in their original forms when they crash against the rocks.

In a certain way, one might think that watching the waves break apart on the shoreline might actually soothe the speaker. If the crashing waves symbolize the nature of existence, then they also represent the cycle of life, ultimately suggesting that things in the natural world don't simply cease to exist; although the waves no longer move through the world in their original form, the water itself doesn't just disappear. Rather, it washes up onto the shore and then, in all likelihood, eases back into the sea to form a new wave.

Accordingly, it would make sense for the speaker to take solace in the fact that the waves break on the shore, since their representation of life's impermanence also bears certain spiritual implications about the possibility of an afterlife or—at the very least—a confirmation that even things that seem to have "vanish[e]d" are still part of the living world in some way.

However, the speaker does not take comfort in watching the waves. Unlike the water of the waves (which rejoins the sea after breaking on the rocks), the past will never return to the speaker. This is why the speaker begins line 15 with the word "but," signaling that the speaker doesn't see these emotional troubles as perfectly comparable to the breaking waves. Certainly, the breaking up of the waves aligns with the speaker's feelings of loss, but that is where the similarities end. Indeed, the speaker is exclusively focused on the fact that the waves splash apart, seeing a connection between this embodiment of impermanence and the death of the speaker's loved one.

For this reason, the poem ends on a bleak note, as the speaker thinks once again about the dead loved one and reflects upon the fact that it's impossible to recapture or relive the past. The happiness the speaker experienced in the past will "never come back" because the past is "dead." Once more, then, happiness feels completely inaccessible to the speaker, who is unable to embrace or change with the present (which, like the waves, is constantly in flux) and equally unable to relive the past.

⚛ SYMBOLS

≋ THE SEA

For the speaker, the sea represents the impermanence of life. Looking out at the water, the speaker recognizes that all things eventually come to an end—an idea embodied by the waves themselves, which crash against the rocks and, in doing so, lose form, thereby ceasing to exist as waves. Accordingly, the sea comes to stand for the inevitability of death. In the same way that even the most powerful waves break apart when they splash against the shore, all human lives someday come to an end.

Interestingly, though, some of the poem's happiest images take place on (or perhaps *in*) the sea, as a sailor sings in the bay and

children play with one another while spending the day with their fisherman father. Similarly, beautiful and impressive boats sail away to unknown paradises. Consequently, the sea's embodiment of impermanence takes on a new layer, ultimately representing the fact that this impermanence is simply a fact of existence, one that shouldn't stop people from living their lives. In other words, the mere idea of impermanence is just a backdrop against which people should let their lives unfold.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 5-10
- Lines 13-14

🛠 POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The poem opens with alliteration, with the first line repeating the same word and, therefore, the same sound. The effect of this is noticeable right away, especially since the /br/ sound is quite prominent. There is a subtle power to this sound, since /br/ creates a low, rounded note that stands out on its own. Indeed, /br/ isn't the kind of sound that is easily overtaken. In this way, the repetition of /br/ aligns with the poem's imagery of waves rolling toward the shore, bringing a sense of strength to the opening line.

Further, each instance of alliteration in line 1 (and, for that matter, line 13) are separated by masculine caesuras (or caesuras that appear after stressed syllables). This places even more emphasis on the /br/ sound. This, in turn, gives the first line a forceful quality that once again reflects the might of the waves as they crash onto the shore. As a result, the speaker prepares readers to view the natural world as relentless and unstoppable—an idea that aligns with the speaker's feelings of powerlessness against the fleeting nature of existence.

There are a number of other alliterative moments throughout the poem, like when the /th/ sound repeats in the words "the" and "that" in line 4. The second stanza also features a smattering of /s/ sounds, creating sibilance that subtly evokes the hissing sound that waves make after having broken on the shore. In keeping with this, most of the alliterative sounds in the second and third stanzas (except for the /b/ sound in line 8) are soft, effectively mimicking the gentler sounds that otherwise strong natural elements like waves often make.

However, this softer, gentler form of alliteration vanishes in the final stanza, as the speaker not only repeats the blunt /br/ sound, but also employs a forceful /d/ sound in line 15: "But the tender grace of a day that is dead ..." As a result, the poem's overall sonic quality returns to a harsh, bleak tone that reflects the speaker's unhappiness.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Br," "br," "br"
- **Line 4:** "Th," "th"
- **Line 6:** "s"
- **Line 7:** "s"
- **Line 8:** "s," "b," "b"
- **Line 10:** "h," "h"
- **Line 12:** "s," "s"
- **Line 13:** "Br," "br," "br"
- **Line 15:** "d," "d"

APOSTROPHE

By addressing the sea, the speaker makes use of apostrophe. Needless to say, the sea can't respond to the speaker's comments, but this doesn't stop the speaker from calling out to it. This use of apostrophe is a way for Tennyson to establish the setting of the poem, making it clear that the speaker is standing before a rolling sea.

More importantly, though, the speaker's one-sided conversation also sheds light on the speaker's emotional state. Indeed, this is a person who is upset and lonely enough to shout out to the natural world. This, in turn, tells readers something about the speaker's somewhat unstable mindset, casting the speaker as so desperate or anguished that yelling out to an unresponsive sea seems worthwhile.

What's tragic is that the sea's inability to respond only emphasizes the extent to which the external world is indifferent to the speaker's emotional pain. As the poem progresses, readers learn that the speaker is grieving the death of a close acquaintance and that the happiness evident in the surrounding environment only makes this process of mourning even more difficult. In keeping with this, the sea will continue to crash against the shore regardless of whether the speaker tells it to.

Similarly, the speaker's friend won't come back no matter what the speaker does or says. Consequently, a sense of futility arises in the poem, as the speaker's address to the sea goes just as unnoticed as the speaker's grief, ultimately calling attention to the speaker's turbulent emotional state.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Break, break, break, /   On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!"
- **Lines 13-14:** "Break, break, break, /   At the foot of thy crags, O Sea!"

ASSONANCE

There is assonance sprinkled throughout "Break, Break, Break," particularly in the poem's first stanza. The repetition of the word "break" in the opening line creates assonance with its

recurring long /a/ sound. This brightens the otherwise blunt effect of the line's alliterative /br/ sound, and though each reader will perhaps hear the line differently, one might argue that the multiple /br/ sounds coupled with the long /a/ sounds make the repetition of "break" rather grating. According to this perspective, the abrasive sound of the opening line could be said to reflect the agitation the speaker feels while looking out at the sea and thinking about the death of a loved one.

In other moments throughout the poem, assonance serves as a kind of connective tissue. In line 6, for example, the short /i/ sound appears in every syllable of the line's second metrical foot:

> That he shouts with his sister at play!

This line consists of three anapests, which are metrical feet contain two unstressed syllables followed by a **stressed** syllable. The second anapest in this line is made up entirely of syllables that feature the short /i/ sound: with his **sis**-. In this moment, the speaker's words fit together nicely in a way that doesn't often happen in the rest of the poem, which often makes use of metrical variations that sound disjointed or abrupt. It's significant, then, that one of the most prominent uses of assonance appears in line 6, which is also one of the few lines in the entire poem that conforms metrically to a recognizable form of trimeter. This is especially fitting for the subject of line 6, since it describes a happy scene in which two children play with one another.

In turn, readers see that assonance achieves different effects depending on where it appears in the poem. Whereas the repeated long /a/ augments the tension inherent to the first line, the short /i/ adds to the music of the sixth line, thereby providing a nice contrast between the speaker's troubled thoughts about the waves and the children's unbothered joy. In both cases, assonance intensifies the sentiments that are already at work in the poem.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "ea," "ea," "ea"
- **Line 2:** "o," "a," "o," "O," "ea"
- **Line 3:** "ou," "ou"
- **Line 4:** "e"
- **Line 6:** "i," "i," "i," "a"
- **Line 7:** "ai"
- **Line 8:** "i," "i," "i," "a"
- **Line 10:** "i"
- **Line 11:** "a," "i," "a"
- **Line 12:** "i," "i"
- **Line 13:** "ea," "ea," "ea"
- **Line 14:** "ea"
- **Line 15:** "a," "a"
- **Line 16:** "e"

ENJAMBMENT

The majority of the lines in "Break, Break, Break" are end-stopped, which calls all the more attention to the instances of enjambment. With that in mind, the most glaring moments of enjambment appear in lines that do not have any punctuation at the end, including lines 3, 9, and 15. For instance, line 3 tips into line 4:

> And I would that my tongue could **utter**
> **The** thoughts that arise in me

Line 3 does not stand on its own, since it only contains the speaker's wish to "utter" something. Indeed, it's not clear until line 4 that the speaker wants to "utter" the troubled thoughts that continue to "arise." In other words, the two lines depend upon one another in order to make sense, linking them together in a way that builds intrigue in readers as they try to discern what, exactly, the speaker is so unable to "utter."

Similarly, the speaker uses enjambment in the poem's penultimate line, which flows into the last line. This is a case of enjambment because the first half of the sentence (line 15) only introduces the subject ("the tender grace of a day that is dead") but fails to provide an active verb for that subject, making it an incomplete phrase that doesn't mean anything on its own. For this reason, the word "will" in the poem's last line is especially important, since it signals the continuation of line 15. This enjambment therefore calls attention to the word "will," thereby reinforcing just how certain the speaker is that it is (and always will be) impossible to relive the past.

Other cases of enjambment in "Break, Break, Break" aren't as prominent or straightforward as the two discussed above. In particular, the enjambment that comes after the refrain, "Break, break, break," is rather subjective and depends upon how one reads the poem. Although a comma separates these three repeated words from the lines that follow them, it's clear that they are an integral part of the message the speaker shouts to the sea, since he's not only telling the waves to "break," but specifically telling them to do so against the rocky shore (as clarified in lines 2 and 14). In turn, the line, "Break, break, break," feels connected to the line that follows it both times it appears.

However, it would be perfectly valid for readers to argue against this viewpoint, upholding that the line, "Break, break, break," stands apart from the rest of the poem—an argument strengthened by the presence of the comma after the final "break." Given that so many of the other lines in the poem have such strong end-stops, though, the comma after the third "break" doesn't create a terribly prominent pause between the two lines, which is why the line is most likely enjambed. This conclusion, however, remains subjective.

Regardless of whether or not there is enjambment after the

first and thirteenth lines, the fact remains that the poem's most obvious cases of enjambment stand out amongst the many end-stopped lines. When, for example, the reader comes to the second stanza and finds that every line is end-stopped, the rhythm established in the first stanza suddenly changes, ultimately reflecting the poem's overall shift in tone and concentration as the speaker considers other people's happiness. In this sense, the speaker's use of enjambment helps shape the poem both in terms of how the lines fit together and how this conveys meaning.

> **Where Enjambment appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Lines 1-2:** "break, /   On"
> - **Lines 3-4:** "utter /   The"
> - **Lines 9-10:** "on /   To"
> - **Lines 13-14:** "break, /   At"
> - **Lines 15-16:** "dead /   Will"

IRONY

The speaker adopts a tone of irony in the second stanza when discussing other people's happiness. At first glance, the speaker's recognition of the fisherman's children and their joy might seem like a genuine appreciation of their youthful, unbothered spirit. However, the way the speaker describes this joy is laced with irony. This is made evident by the fact that the word "well" could easily be replaced with "good" in contemporary (or at least colloquial) English, such that the first half of the second stanza would read, "O, good for the fisherman's boy, / That he shouts with his sister at play!"

In this way, the speaker's consideration of the children's happiness isn't celebratory or appreciative, but subtly scornful. Indeed, it is as if the speaker sees others' happiness as an insult to the speaker's own misery, ultimately holding this against the children in the bay and the young sailor singing in his boat. Consequently, when the speaker uplifts the children and the sailor's glee, it is only to show readers that this sort of happiness stands in stark contrast to the speaker's grief.

Overall, the irony in "Break, Break, Break" is somewhat broad, since it has to do with mourning and the process of moving on with life. The speaker is stricken and immobilized by sorrow, but the outside world continues on like normal. There is a certain irony, then, in the fact that the speaker fixates on something as transitory and dynamic as the waves in the sea. Unlike the speaker, these waves are in constant motion. The speaker, on the other hand, is frozen in place, yearning for a "day that is dead" even while obsessing over imagery that speaks to the fact that life is constantly in flux. This tension is integral to the poem and illustrates the speaker's struggle to reconcile a painful emotional state with the external world or, to put it more generally, the speaker's struggle to accept that life goes on despite how individual people might feel.

> **Where Irony appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Lines 5-8:** "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!"

JUXTAPOSITION

The speaker uses an ironic tone to praise other people's happiness in a tongue-in-cheek way, but this attitude doesn't take away from the juxtaposition that arises between the speaker's grief and the contentment of the surrounding world. In particular, the second stanza stands out from the rest of the poem, as the speaker's sudden focus on the fisherman's children and the carefree sailor presents a jarring contrast with the mournful and depressing subject that can be found in the other three stanzas.

In the first stanza, the speaker's language implies that the setting of the poem is bleak and unwelcoming, as hinted at by the idea that waves are breaking over "cold gray stones." Accordingly, the speaker invites readers into a poem that takes place in a seemingly desolate landscape, one that is unwelcoming and perhaps a bit brutal.

However, this changes in the second stanza, as readers note that the speaker *isn't* actually in a harsh environment. Instead, the speaker is in the kind of place where young children can play while yelling out in glee and young sailors can casually sing to themselves while drifting across the cove. This is an abrupt shift from the world of the first stanza, a juxtaposition that sheds light on the speaker's perspective. That the speaker is so unhappy in such a seemingly pleasant environment suggests that the speaker would be depressed in *any* environment.

This, in turn, indicates that the speaker is unable to see the world for what it is, too wrapped up in grief to participate in the various pleasures that are available in the immediate surroundings. Accordingly, juxtaposition in "Break, Break, Break" invites readers to consider the extent to which sadness can interfere with the ability to accurately assess one's own reality.

> **Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Lines 1-8:** "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!"

REPETITION

There are multiple different forms of repetition in "Break, Break, Break." The most immediately recognizable is the speaker's use of epizeuxis in the first line, as the word "break"

repeats three times in quick succession without any conjunctions or other intervening words. In this context, epizeuxis communicates a sense of despair, taking on a mournful tone as the speaker addresses the waves of the sea in such an urgent, feverish way. Before readers even learn that the speaker has lost a close acquaintance, the epizeuxis makes it quite obvious that the speaker is upset, since only somebody dealing with difficult emotions would yell at the sea with the kind of desperate, pleading quality that comes along with the relentless repetition of the word "break." In this regard, epizeuxis alerts readers to the speaker's flustered and discontent mental state.

Another kind of repetition that appears in the poem is the speaker's use of anaphora in the second stanza. Lines 5 and 7 both begin with "O, well for," and lines 6 and 8 both begin with "That he," as the speaker applies a disdainful tone to the children at play and the young sailor singing in his boat. These repeated phrases at the beginning of each sentence heighten the overall rhythm of the stanza, creating a nice symmetry that accentuates this section's musical quality.

Although the poem's rhyme scheme only calls for the second and fourth lines of each stanza to rhyme, the anaphora in the second stanza makes up for the otherwise unmusical sound of the unrhymed lines. As a result, the second stanza easily emerges as the most sonically pleasing moment in the entire poem, and this reflects the beautiful joy of the children and the young sailor. What's more, this heightened musicality intensifies the juxtaposition between the happiness in the surrounding environment and the speaker's sadness, which is on display in every other stanza.

The poem's final form of repetition is perhaps the most obvious when readers look at the poem as a whole: the last stanza parallels the construction of the first stanza. Once more employing the epizeuxis the appears in the opening line, the speaker repeats, "Break, break, break," in line 13. Accordingly, this line becomes a refrain, one that holds the poem together and signals a sense of conclusion, even if the speaker's gloominess hasn't changed from the first stanza. Interestingly, though, it is exactly this lack of emotional development that lends meaning to the poem, since the second and third stanzas have added context to the speaker's unhappiness.

In the first stanza, it's unclear why the speaker is upset, so readers focus on the waves and speculate as to why the speaker is so preoccupied by the way they "break" on the "cold gray stones." By the final stanza, though, readers understand two important things: that the speaker is mourning a close acquaintance, and that the surrounding environment isn't actually as bleak as it appears in the first stanza—after all, the speaker has even acknowledged that there is happiness all around. This is why the return of the poem's refrain is so significant, since it indicates that the speaker's mood hasn't changed at all, even after recognizing the joy circulating

throughout the immediate environment. No matter how much happiness is evident in the external world, it seems, the speaker will continue to dejectedly stare at the breaking waves and focus on dismal thoughts.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Break, break, break,"
- **Line 2:** "O Sea!"
- **Line 5:** "O, well for"
- **Line 6:** "That he"
- **Line 7:** "O, well for"
- **Line 8:** " That he"
- **Line 13:** "Break, break, break,"
- **Line 14:** "O Sea!"

SIBILANCE

Sibilance runs throughout "Break, Break, Break," creating a hissing sound that is reminiscent of waves crashing and fizzing against a rocky shoreline. This is evident as early as the second line, with the repetition of the hissing /s/ sounds in the words "stones" and "Sea." Even according to strict, narrow definitions of sibilance—which uphold that only true /s/ sounds are sibilant—the poem is full of this device. Lines 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, and 14 all make use of the hissing /s/, which slithers from line to line and from stanza to stanza. In this way, sibilance connects the poem to itself, even while the stanzas are often at odds with one another in terms of subject.

To that end, the second stanza juxtaposes the speaker's sorrow with happy scenes taking place in the bay, but the sibilant /s/ remains, subtly connecting these lines (which are, in many ways, a departure from the rest of the poem) to the original setting and the idea of waves hissing against the shore. In other words, sibilance remains a through-line from the first stanza to the second, despite the abrupt shift in tone and focus.

It's also worth noting that, according to less rigid definitions, "Break, Break, Break" has even more instances of sibilance than have been marked here. According to this point of view, /sh/, /z/, and even /th/ or /f/ sounds can count as sibilance, meaning that lines like, "The thoughts that arise in me," or, "O, well for the fisherman's boy," are also sibilant. This reading only further emphasizes the way that sibilance winds its way through "Break, Break, Break," effectively providing a sense of consistency in a poem that might otherwise feel stylistically or thematically disconnected from itself at times.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "s," "S"
- **Line 6:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 7:** "s"
- **Line 8:** "s"

- **Line 9:** "s," "s"
- **Line 12:** "s," "c," "s"
- **Line 14:** "s," "S"

📄 VOCABULARY

Break (Line 1, Line 13) - In this context, the word "break" describes to the act of losing formation, referring to the way waves come apart when they crash against a rocky shore. This use of the word also brings to mind "breakers," a name for waves that dissemble into foam, though this term was still new when Tennyson wrote "Break, Break, Break" in 1835 and, therefore, might not have been in the poet's mind at the time of composition.

Thy (Line 2, Line 14) - An old-fashioned way of saying "your."

Would (Line 3) - An archaic form of "to wish" or "to desire."

Utter (Line 3) - To speak or to express something.

Lad (Line 7) - A young man.

Stately (Line 9) - Something that is "stately" is respectable or impressive. In this context, the word "stately" lends a majestic, illustrious quality to the boats that the speaker watches on the horizon.

Haven (Line 10) - A haven is defined as a harbor or a port, but it can also refer to a refuge or safe place. In this case, the "haven under the hill" that speaker references sounds idyllic, as if it is a heavenly paradise.

Vanish'd (Line 11) - Disappeared, no longer present.

Foot (Line 14) - The bottom or base of something.

Crags (Line 14) - Steep, rocky cliffs or ledges.

Tender (Line 15) - Soft or sensitive. In this usage, "tender" denotes a certain preciousness and an overall fondness.

Grace (Line 15) - In this line, "grace" refers to a sense of ease or happiness that used to exist in the speaker's life.

Dead (Line 15) - Lost to the past and gone forever.

⏱ FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Break, Break, Break" doesn't adhere to a strict poetic form. However, this is not to say that the poem has no structure at all, since it is very clearly organized into four quatrains, ultimately creating a 16-line poem reminiscent of the Quatern, a medieval French form. In addition to this stanza form, "Break, Break, Break" alludes to the formal conventions of the Quatern in that many of its lines *almost* contain eight syllables. Of course, the majority of the lines are seven or nine syllables, but the mere

fact that they hover around eight syllables could be interpreted as a nod to the standard Quatern form.

At the same time, it's evident that "Break, Break, Break" follows its own structure, as the second and fourth lines of every stanza rhyme with each other—something that does not align with the conventions of the Quatern, nor with the structure of other poetic forms that use quatrains (like the Kyrielle). Similarly, the line, "Break, break, break," acts as a refrain, but it doesn't function in the same way that refrains work in Quaterns or Kyrielles, both of which repeat the same line in every stanza.

Instead, the refrain in this poem appears only twice, and it is this infrequency that draws attention to it. Indeed, when the speaker repeats, "Break, break, break," in the last stanza, readers recall its use in the opening line. This, in turn, gives the final stanza a sense of conclusion or, at the very least, a feeling of return to the sentiment with which the poem begins. As a result, this unique employment of a refrain (and, therefore, the divergence from the Quatern) accentuates the idea that the speaker cannot escape the unhappiness that is evident in the very first stanza.

METER

"Break, Break, Break" is not written in free verse, even though its meter varies throughout the poem. On the whole, one could argue that the speaker employs irregular trimeter, since the majority of the lines are made up of three metrical feet. However, even the lines with three metrical feet tend to vary from one another in terms of how they are broken up and where the stressed syllables fall. For instance, there are noticeable differences between each line in the first stanza:

> Break, || break, || break,
> On thy **cold** | gray **stones**, || O **Sea!**
> And I **would** | that my **tongue** | could **ut**ter
> The **thoughts** | that a**rise** | in **me**

The first line contains only three words, but the combination of these stressed syllables and the caesuras between them gives one the feeling that there are three separate feet at work in the line. In keeping with this, the rest of the lines in the stanza each have three metrical feet, despite the fact that these lines are much longer than the first one. Indeed, line 2 consists of an anapest ("On thy **cold**"), an iamb ("gray **stones**"), and a spondee ("**O Sea!**," though some might argue that "Sea" receives a heavier stress than "O," making it an iamb).

This line therefore cements the feeling of trimeter in the poem, though it doesn't establish a reliable metrical pattern, considering that line 3 is made up of an anapest, *another* anapest, and an amphibrach (an uncommon unstressed-**stressed**-unstressed foot that is most often used in anapestic meters). Further, the stanza's last line includes an

iamb, an anapest, and another iamb, providing yet another variation on the poem's use of trimeter. In short, the entire first stanza is in trimeter, but no two lines look the same.

Clearly, the scansion in "Break, Break, Break" can get quite technical and tricky (and, for that matter, subjective). But what's most important to grasp isn't necessarily the complicated use of mismatched metrical feet, but the most glaring moments of inconsistency. For instance, every line in the first two stanzas has three feet, but the third and fourth stanzas each include one line with *four* feet. This means that these lines are written in [tetrameter](link), complicating the poem's rhythm and forcing readers to slow down.

In turn, readers are encouraged to more thoroughly consider what the speaker is saying. This has a significant impact on the overall poem, since the difficult meter in lines 11 and 15 ultimately reflects the speaker's discomfort with the idea of death and impermanence. In this way, the varied rhythm in "Break, Break, Break" helps accentuate the speaker's tumultuous emotional state as well as the turbulence of the sea the speaker looks out upon.

RHYME SCHEME

"Break, Break, Break" follows its own rhyme scheme, in which the second and fourth lines of every stanza rhyme. Thus, its rhyme scheme looks like this, with new rhyme sounds slotted into the B lines in each stanza:

> ABCB

This is a fairly common rhyme scheme, and its steadiness contrasts with the irregularity of the poem's meter. What's most notable, though, is that the poem's first rhyme pair—"Sea" and "me"—reappears in the final stanza. This reinforces the idea that the final stanza signals a return to the mindset the speaker exhibited at the outset of the poem, meaning that—even though the middle stanzas focus on happy scenes—the speaker is ultimately unmoved by the joy on display in the surrounding environment. In this regard, the rhyme scheme accentuates the speaker's inability to move on with life in the aftermath of a loved one's death.

SPEAKER

In the world of the poem, the speaker's gender or identity is never revealed. The few things readers know for sure is that this speaker is in the process of mourning the death of a close acquaintance and that the speaker is standing on the shoreline and looking out at the sea. In terms of the speaker's general attitude, it becomes clear as the poem progresses that the speaker finds it emotionally difficult to witness other people's happiness. This is because the speaker feels unable to embrace this happiness, since the speaker is too wrapped up in mourning the death of a loved one to enjoy life. In keeping with this, the

speaker yearns for the past even with the knowledge that it's impossible to turn back time.

It's worth pointing out that "Break, Break, Break" is often read as an [elegy](link) for Alfred Lord Tennyson's close friend Arthur Hallam, who died unexpectedly at the age of 22. For this reason, many readers view the speaker as Tennyson himself, and though this is most likely an accurate assumption, there isn't quite enough evidence in the poem to decisively come to this conclusion.

SETTING

"Break, Break, Break" is set on the shore of an unspecified bay. The speaker stands on dry land and looks out over the water, watching waves crash over the shoreline's rocky features. This setting is significant because the speaker projects a sense of unease onto the surrounding elements, seeing the breaking waves as a reminder of life's impermanence. In this sense, the surrounding environment exacerbates the speaker's sorrow regarding the loss of a loved one.

Many scholars believe that Tennyson composed "Break, Break, Break" while staying in the English seaside town of Mablethorpe, which he often visited. Because readers tend to view the poem's speaker as Tennyson himself, then, there is a popular theory that "Break, Break, Break" is set in Mablethorpe, though there is nothing in the poem itself to fully confirm this.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Tennyson wrote "Break, Break, Break" in 1835 but didn't publish it until seven years later, in 1842. The poem appeared in his second book of poetry, a two-volume collection called, simply, *Poems*. The first volume of this collection contained new poems, but the second volume consisted of older poems—including "Break, Break, Break" and "[Ulysses](link)," a poem that, like "Break, Break, Break," was written in the first half of the 1830s and was, in some ways, a poem that helped Tennyson move on after Arthur Hallam's death.

Other notable poems in this collection include "[Locksley Hall](link)" and "[The Two Voices](link)." Notably, "The Two Voices" deals with Tennyson's depression in the aftermath of Hallam's death—a subject that "Break, Break, Break" also centers upon (albeit less specifically). Similarly, Tennyson later published "[In Memoriam A. H. H.](link)," a long poem that deals more explicitly with Hallam's death. What's abundantly clear, then, is that many of Tennyson's most famous poems arose from the loss of his close friend.

"Break, Break, Break" is also comparable to Tennyson's

"Crossing the Bar," which focuses on death and transition. Much like "Break, Break, Break," this poem is set by the ocean and uses nautical imagery to convey certain ideas about immortality. Of course, the sea comes up frequently in other famous poetry, making meaningful appearances in well-known poems like Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and Emily Dickinson's "I started Early – Took my Dog –," to name just a few.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In terms of Tennyson's place in the 19th-century literary landscape, it's worth mentioning that he proceeded William Wordsworth as the Poet Laureate of England and Ireland, a position he held for 41 years (the longest of any poet to date). Heavily influenced by Romantic poets like Wordsworth and John Keats, Tennyson's poetry represented a continuation of the Romantic tradition into the Victorian Era, especially in his close attention to detailed description, vivid imagery, and an overall connection to nature. At the same time, though, Tennyson's work also shifted away from Romantic poetry in its adherence to formal structures and rhythm, often delivering the emotionality of the previous era in a more measured, distilled manner.

Tennyson's work also exhibits the Victorian tendency to depict the world in bleak, cynical terms, an approach that contrasts the celebratory tone employed by the Romantics. This was largely the result of the Victorian desire to address changes taking place in the 19th century and the many downsides of such rapid, profit-based societal developments.

Whereas the Romantics bemoaned the *onset* of the Industrial Revolution, then, Victorian poets like Tennyson took it upon themselves to critique the *results* of industrialization, frequently reminding readers of the world's sorrows instead of praising society's supposed advancements. And although "Break, Break, Break" isn't about societal change, the speaker's struggle to accept that life goes on even in moments of grief showcases an unwillingness or hesitancy to embrace change—a hesitancy that aligns with the Victorian tendency to second-guess the value of 19th century England's progress.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Pictures of Tennyson — Because the 19th century saw the onset of photography, there are a number of pictures of Tennyson himself available for perusal! (https://www.gettyimages.com/photos/lord-alfred-tennyson?mediatype=photography&phrase=lord%20alfred%20

- Hear the Poem Out Loud — Listen to a dramatic reading of "Break, Break, Break" by the famous British actor Sir John Gielgud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CEMZYEvqLUM)

- A More Detailed Look — Read about Tennyson's life in more detail, especially regarding his tumultuous upbringing. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/alfred-tennyson)

- The Poet's Life — Watch a documentary about Tennyson's life. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1dryb5Qnf6o)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ALFRED LORD TENNYSON POEMS

- Crossing the Bar
- Tears, Idle Tears
- The Brook
- The Charge of the Light Brigade
- Ulysses

HOW TO CITE

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