

"Break, break, break"

by Alfred Tennyson

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Summary

The speaker is watching the sea whose waves are breaking on the "cold grey stones". He is sad because "he cannot give voice to his thoughts." He hears the shouting of the fisherman's boy with his sister while they play, and the young sailor sings in his boat, but the speaker is in different mood. Other ships move silently to their "haven under the hill," and this scene seems to remind him of the absence of a dear friend he cared for. He cannot feel "the person's touch or hear the person's voice". The speaker compares between the recurrent voice of the colliding waves on the rocks and the "tender grace" of the bygone days with his friend that will never return to him.

Analysis

The poem conveys the feelings of a person toward his lost friend. It was 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 sorrow as sadness over a lost lover, it probably reveals the feeling at any loss of a beloved person in death, like Tennyson's depression over losing Hallam.

Apparently, the poem seems relatively simple and straightforward, and the feeling is easy to distinguish: the problem of the speaker is that he could not express his sad thoughts and his memories, compared with the vitality of the sea with its waves and ships. The people around him don't care about his sadness and his great loss. The poem's deeper attention is "in the series of comparisons between the external world and the poet's internal world". The outer world represents real life, or the real field where the speaker used to play. The inner world is what reflects on his mind according to the influence of the outer world. The example in this poem is the loss of his friend and his memories with him.

In the first stanza, the sea is beating the stones, and the speaker looks sad that the sea is vital and moving while he is unable to express his sadness. In addition, the sea does not care of what happens to his friend and does not share him his sadness. The recurrence of “break” appropriately bears the incessant movement of the waves, and these waves emphasize his disability to act. Another interpretation for the recurrence of the word 'break' is that the speaker's inner wish is to crash everything in order to express his feelings of sorrow.

In the second stanza, the poet correspondingly distances between himself and the cheerful people around him. They have happiness and completion, but he does not. The brother and sister; the sailor and his boat; the speaker has no friend. They have reason to be happy, but he has no reason to be alike. The sense of envy might be valid here, but it is usually to suggest that these unconcerned young people have fatalities yet to come.

In the third stanza the speaker watches the “stately ships” proceeding to their “haven under the hill,” and they seem satisfied with their ends. But the grave is not a pleasurable haven, in contrast, which means, "there is no more hand to touch, no more voice to hear". The speaker is obsessed by his sad feelings, his memory of his deceased friend overwhelming what the speaker watches around him. The critic H. Sopher comments on the discrepancy 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 watches the waves which break on the steep rock faces, with their useless efforts to go beyond. Also, for the speaker, there is no way to get the dead back. Sopher comments on this image 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.” Yet, both the sea and the speaker keep their fruitless efforts since they have no other choice.

Form

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, sharp edges of the speaker's grief. Meanwhile, the ABCB rhyme scheme in each stanza may express the regularity of the waves when they collide with the rocks.

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