

CLASS 7 ENGLISH

BREAK, BREAK, BREAK

By Alfred Lord Tennyson

About the poet:

Alfred Lord Tennyson was the most renowned poet of the Victorian Era. Born in England in 1809, he began writing poetry right from his boyhood. Some of his most famous poems are "Mariana", "The Lady of Shalott", "In Memoriam" etc. His poems are very rhythmical and deals with the themes of death and lamentation.

THEME

Break, Break, Break is a short poem with a sad and nostalgic tone. The themes of memory and nostalgia features heavily in the poem and there is a distinct feeling that the poet is evoking the memory of someone he has lost. It describes the feelings of loss and the realisation that there is something beyond the cycle of life and death.

Summary

BREAK BREAK BREAK written by Alfred Lord Tennyson, is an elegy written on the death of his best friend Arthur Hallam. This poem is basically about death and loss.

The speaker is looking at the ocean and is wishing that he too knew how to express his grief. He sees a fisherman's kid hanging out with his sister, and he hears a sailor singing, but they don't cheer him up – they just remind him of the "voice that is still", or the voice of his dead friend that he can't talk to anymore. The ocean waves keep breaking on the beach, and time keeps marching on, but the speaker can't go back in time to when his friend was still alive.

Understanding the Poem

Q1. Who or what is being addressed in the first line?

Ans) The sea is being addressed in the first line.

Q2. In the first stanza what does the speaker wish he could do? What does it say about his state of mind?

Ans) In the first stanza, the speaker wishes that he could speak out loud the thoughts that come to his mind. This shows that he was feeling overwhelmed and upset. His mind was so full of difficult emotions that he wanted to express them and feel better, but he could not.

Q3. Who are the people mentioned in the second stanza? Where are they and what are they doing?

Ans) The fisherman's boy, his sister and the sailor boy are the people mentioned in the second stanza. The fisherman's children are playing on the shore. The sailor is singing and sailing a boat on the bay.

Q4. Read the third stanza. What does the speaker mention that has remained unchanged? What has changed?

Ans) In the third stanza, the speaker mentions that the stately ships sail away to their destinations as before. That scene has remained unchanged. What has changed is that the speaker's beloved friend is no more, so the speaker can no longer hold his hand or hear his voice.

Q5. I will never come back to me. What will never come back to the speaker? Why?

Ans) The tender grace of a day that is dead – the beauty and warmth of the time that is past, the time spent with his friend, will never come back to the speaker, because the friend with whom the speaker spent the time is no more.

Q6. how does the poem show that life and nature go on despite what happens to human beings?

Ans) The speaker is mourning the death of his friend. He is deeply sad but he cannot express his sorrow. He misses his friend's company and his voice and knows that the time spent with his friend will never return. Yet he notices that the sea waves crash on the shore as always; children play and sing and sail as before, unaffected by his sorrow. Ships sail on. Nothing beyond his own life stops or changes because of his sorrow. Thus life and nature go on despite whatever happens to human beings.

Appreciating the Poem

Q1. Personification is a style of giving human qualities to something non-human in order to make it easier to imagine and more interesting. This poem uses personification and the first stanza. Which thing is given human qualities and how?

Ans) In the first stanza, the sea has been given human qualities. The speaker addresses the sea directly, as he would address a person, and asks the sea to break on its cold gray stones, as if the breaking of the sea waves on the shore is like an action performed by a human being.

Q2. Repetition is another technique used in the poem. Which words have been repeated? Why do you think these words have been repeated – what effect does the repetition produce?

Ans) The words repeated in this poem are 'break, break, break', 'O Sea' and 'O (well) for the The first set of words have been repeated to show the speaker's helplessness and hopelessness as he asks the sea to keep breaking its waves on the shore. The word 'break' may reflect the heartbreak he is feeling because of the loss of his friend. When the poet mentions 'O, for the ...' he wishes that he could get back the company of his friend. All these repetitions express sadness and distress.

Q3a. Which words, phrases or lines express sadness and longing (a strong desire, specially for something which is difficult or impossible to have)?

Ans 3) (a) The words, phrases or lines which express sadness and longing are:

The word 'break' and the lines 'And I would that my tongue could utter/ The thoughts that arise in me'. 'But O, for the touch of a vanish'd hand, / And the sound of the voice that is still!' and 'But the tender grace of a day that is dead/ will never come back to me.'

3b. Which stanza captures a different mood – one of joy and light-heartedness?

Ans 3) (b) The second stanza expresses a mood of joy and light-heartedness.

Q4. Silence – or the inability to speak - has been mentioned twice in the poem who are the two people who cannot speak? why?

Ans 4) The two people who are unable to speak are the speaker and his friend. The speaker's friend is no more, so his voice cannot be heard anymore. The speaker is deeply upset by the death of his friend- he is so distressed that he cannot express all that is going on in his mind.

So he too is unable to speak.

EXTRA QUESTIONS

1. What is the central idea of the poem Break, Break, Break?

The central idea of the poem is the loss of a loved one. The emotions the poet indirectly describes pertain to this loss and the medium used to describe it, the sea and all that it consists of, is also a play on the feeling of loss and separation. The poem goes on about the gory crashing of the waves and the grief of the poet as well as his inability to register pleasant feelings of joy and laughter as his sorrow has engulfed him, his loss being the loss of a very dear friend. It is an intense poem that brings forward the phases of life with the booming waves, the adventurous and content sailor, the happiness present in the presence of family, the journey of life to a destination and an eventual death, and though life might not be in the same order, the poem concludes on the note that loss is irreversible and separation painful and that completes the cycle of the presentation of loss as a central idea.

2. What is the tone and mood of the poem ' Break, Break, Break' ?

The poem is filled with pathos for a lost soul. The poem is standing on the sandy seashore and looking at the steady break of the waves on the rocks. He is remembering someone, probably a close friend and wonders if he could just speak aloud the gush of thoughts that come to his mind. He observes that everything near the sea is happening the way it usually does but life has changed for him as he can never feel the touch not hear the voice of the dear one who is no longer alive.