English literature for the first year student's

Break, Break, Break

By Alfred lord Tennyson

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!

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!

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.

Summary:
The narrator grieves the loss of his friend, Arthur Henry Hallam, a promising poet and essayist who had been engaged to Tennyson's sister, Emily. Hallam died of a stroke in 1833 when he was only 22. Nature, of course, does not stop to mourn the loss of anyone. Cold and indifferent, it carries on, the waves of the ocean breaking against rocks along the seashore without pausing even for a moment. The rest of the world carries on as well: the fisherman's boy happily playing with his sister, the sailor merrily singing, the ship busily plying the waters of commerce. Downcast, isolated by his grief, the narrator yearns to touch the hand of his friend once more, to hear the
sound of his voice. But, no, Hallam is gone forever; his "tender grace" will never again return.

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 bay

(Lines 9-12): Stanza 3 uses this figure of speech as follows:

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!

Alliteration (Line 15): day that is dead

Repetend: Line 13 repeats Line 1; Line 7 repeats the first two words of Line 5.

Paradox: Touch of a vanished hand (Line 11), sound of a voice that is still (Line 12).

1...Break: To crash into a shore and change into foam.
2...O: Interjection used before the name of a person or thing addressed by a poet. It is intended to express deep yearning or surprise, joy, pain, fear, wonderment, and other emotions or sensations.
3...would: Wish
4...bay: Part of the sea that cuts into the shoreline. A bay forms after the sea erodes soft rock between masses of hard rock. A bay is smaller than a gulf but larger than a cove.
5...crag: Rough, steep masses of rock at the shoreline

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.
Indifference of Nature

Nature continues to function according to its rhythms and cycles regardless of what happens, good or bad, to human beings. The temperature may plummet just when a poor family runs out of fuel. The sun may shine and the birds may sing in the middle of the bloodiest of battles. And the sea will rise and fall in a defiant, unrelenting rhythm that refuses to acknowledge tragedy in the everyday life of average men. Tennyson laments this cold indifference in "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.

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.