Name _____ Class _____ Date _____



Break, Break, Break

by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Grades 7–10 · Common Core RL.8.4, RL.8.2, RL.8.5

Tennyson probably wrote the poem in 1834, soon after his closest friend, Arthur Hallam, died suddenly at 22. It was published in 1842. It has four four-line stanzas. The opening three stressed beats imitate waves hitting the shore.

THE POEM

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!

And the stately ships go on
To their haven under the hill;
But O for the touch of a vanish'd 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.

VOCABULARY

utter — say, speak aloud

arise — come up

lad — a boy or young man

stately — grand and dignified

haven — a harbor, a safe place

vanish'd — disappeared

crags — steep, rough rocks

tender grace — gentle beauty

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who does the speaker address in stanza 1, and what does he wish he could do?

2. Who is happy in stanza 2? Why does the speaker notice them?

3. What does the speaker long for in stanza 3?

4. How does the sound of "Break, break, break" fit the mood and setting?

5. What does the last stanza say about the past? How is the sea different from the speaker?

WRITING PROMPT

Write a poem of 3–4 stanzas about missing someone or something, in a place where life goes on cheerfully around you. Begin with a repeated word.

Break, Break, Break — Answer Key

1. The sea ("O Sea!"); he wishes "that my tongue could utter / The thoughts that arise in me," but his grief is too deep for words.
2. "the fisherman's boy" playing with his sister and "the sailor lad" singing; their happiness contrasts with his sorrow.
3. "the touch of a vanish'd hand, / And the sound of a voice that is still": his dead friend.
4. The heavy, repeated beats sound like waves crashing and feel like a heart breaking.
5. "the tender grace of a day that is dead / Will never come back to me." The sea keeps returning, but the past and his friend never will.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/break-break-break-alfred-lord-tennyson/