

Rob Williams

Compare and Contrast 'Break, Break, Break' and 'Crossing the Bar'

Although the two poems, *'Break, Break, Break'* and *'Crossing the Bar'* share a similar major premise, the expression of death through the metaphor of the sea, Tennyson is able to extract two antithetical responses to the subject of death. In *'Break, Break, Break'*, the overwhelming emotions are ones of melancholy, of despair and horror at the thought of death (or rather the death of Hallam). This is unsurprising as Tennyson was writing this poem in 1834, shortly after the death of his best-friend Hallam. His death, along with other problems at the time led to Tennyson writing very pessimistically about life (and death), however it was during this turbulent period in Tennyson's life that much of his greatest work was written.

In contrast *'Crossing the Bar'*, although discussing his own death, is a poem of acceptance of the inevitability of death. It is not delivered in a melancholic, morose way, but rather is a dignified acknowledgment that death comes to all, and his *"one clear call"* is approaching. There is, one may suggest, majesty in the simplistic view of death that is expressed in *'Crossing the Bar'* and it is an analysis of death much preferable to that of *'Break, Break, Break'*.

The severity and relentless nature of the poem is expressed immediately in the title and the first line, both *'Break, Break, Break'*. 'Break' is a harsh, cold word, and the fact that Tennyson repeats it three times, suggests a relentless monotony that wears one away. The line sentence continues *"...On thy cold grey stones, O Sea!"*, The effect of the long syllables that are stressed is to slow the line down and emphasise them. This is very heavy, depressive language. The severity of the line is evident if one juxtapositions it with the first line of *'Crossing the Bar'*,

*"Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me"*

The imagery of the first line star suggests an easy passage across *'the Bar'* to meet his *'Pilot'*. The fact he is starting his journey at the end of the day implies that he is ready to leave the mortal world. Furthermore the soft, warm s' of the first line are in complete contrast to the harsh, bleak *'Break, Break, Break'*. The only comparison with the opening of *'Break, Break, Break'* is the spondee, *"one clear call"*, with its long syllables. However, it emphasises the clarity and simplicity of its feelings, along with a religious undertone which is eminent throughout the poem.

The contradictory descriptions of the sea are a major point of comparison between the two poems. Tennyson used the Sea many times during his creative career to symbolise the passage to death, and to demonstrate the differing moods of his poems. With its inconsistent forms, raging from 30ft waves, to perfectly level, mirror like oceans, it is a the perfect metaphor for description of emotions. This is shown in the comparisons with these two poems.

In *'Break, Break, Break'*, the sea is presented as a demonic beast tormenting the reader with its relentless crashing against the rocks. The waves break on *"cold grey stone"* at the *"foot of thy crags"*. It is a unsympathetic, cruel image which is symbolic of the emotions within the grieving author of this poem. It is also a never ending sound, which is shown by the fact that both the first and final verses begin with *'Break, Break, Break'*; it is always in the background. This adds to the

frustration that the world continues, that life goes on for everyone else but the “*tender grace of a day that is dead/Will never come back to me*”.

In comparison the sea in ‘*Crossing the Bar*’ is a tender ‘gentle giant’ that is easing the passage towards death. The lines “*But such a tide as moving seems asleep/Too full for sound and foam*” illustrate perfectly the different nature of the sea in this poem. This sea is calm, peaceful and still, much like his ‘passage’. The sea also, rather than tormenting is comforting. Firstly the lines, “*When I put out to sea*” and “*when I embark;*” suggest the beginning of a journey, rather than the end of one and therefore an increased sense of optimism. If the religious, christen values are followed (which seem to be the case in ‘*Crossing the Bar*’) the journey is the one to the after-life, to heaven. Secondly “*When that which drew from out the boundless deep/ Turns again home*” with the long first line consisting of 10 syllables, followed by a short line, with three words, each mono-syllabic and stressed, all culminate in the emphasising his journey ‘*home*’. There is a heightened sense of acceptance and contentment with his *return*, and certainly is comparably with the loneliness and melancholy at the static nature of the central character’s life in ‘*Break, Break, Break*’.

The stasis of the character in ‘*Break, Break, Break*’, along with his bitterness and loneliness, is accentuated in the second and third verses of the poem.